NF

ISSUE #50: LONG LIVE KING KOOPA
+ ADDITION ADDICTION

HYRULE WARRIORS: AGE OF CALAMITY

POKÉMON SWORD & SHIELD EXPANSION PASS, PART 2: **THE CROWN TUNDRA**

PIKMIN 3 DELUXE

PERSONA 5 STRIKERS

NEO: **THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU**

SAKUNA: OF RICE AND RUIN

PUYO PUYO TETRIS 2

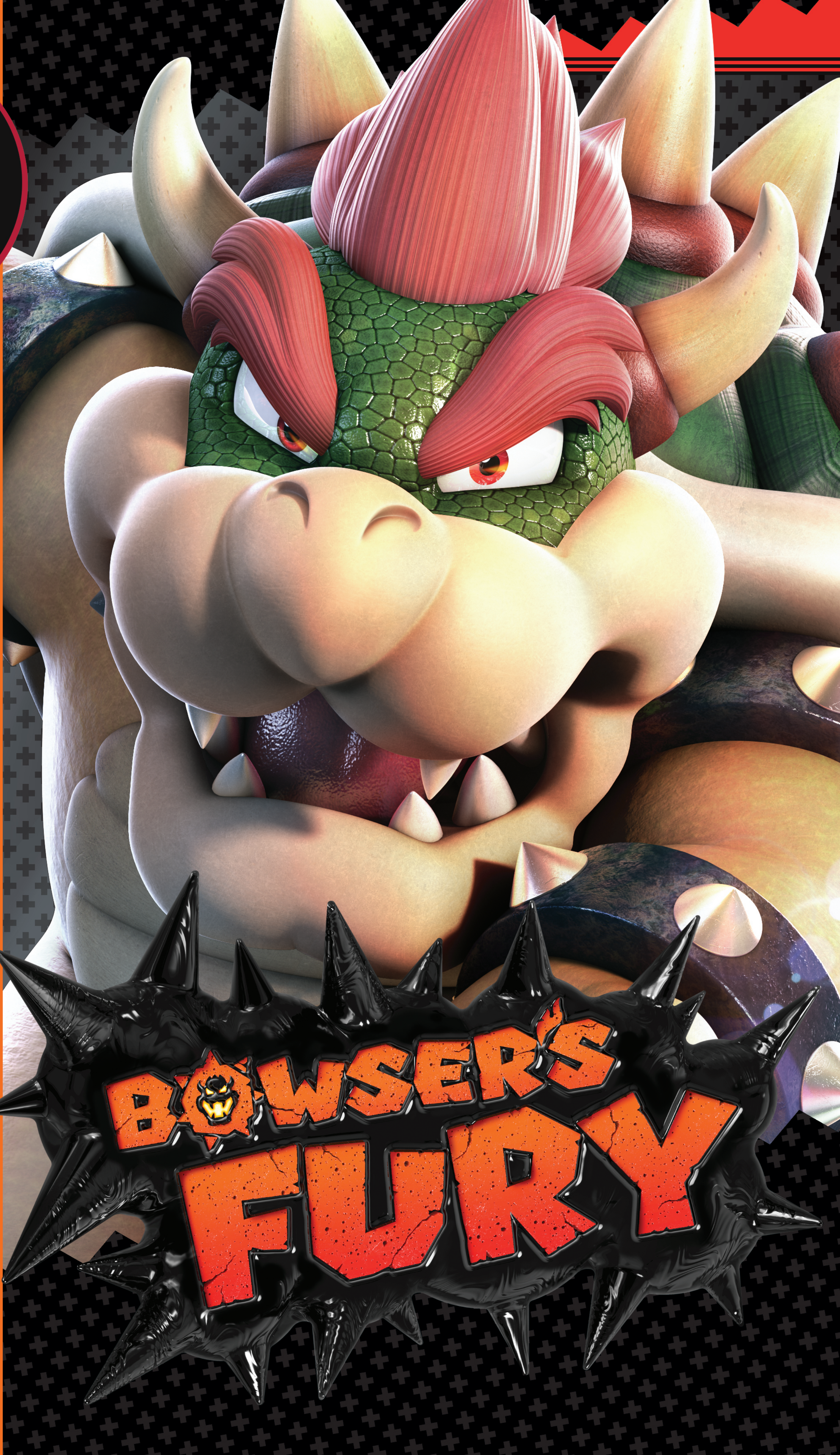
BRAVELY DEFAULT II

KINGDOM HEARTS: MELODY OF MEMORY

GAME & WATCH: SUPER MARIO BROS.

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

FIRE EMBLEM: SHADOW DRAGON & THE BLADE OF LIGHT



JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2021

50TH ISSUE ~ 8 YEARS

ISSUE #1 JANUARY 2013 ~ ISSUE #50 JANUARY 2021

I'M RUNNING OUT of ways to say "Thank You!" to all of you! We've celebrated NF's birthday seven times before, but on this eighth arrival of the anniversary of our first issue's publication, it's time for a grander celebration: This is also the *50th* Nintendo Force issue overall! 50!! That's gonzo-bonkers-nutso-crazy!

Again, thank you to all of our loyal supporters out there, from those of you who've been members of the Force since Day 1 all those years ago all the way to any brand-new readers who are just beginning their NF adventure with this very issue. It has been a joy bringing this publication to life time and time again, 50 times over now, for these past eight years.

I'm especially thankful for our team of writers and artists, who have worked so steadily and diligently all this while. While video game journalism overall has sharply shifted in the direction of video production and livestreaming over this same span of eight years, this dedicated group has remained committed to the original vision of NF: keeping print coverage of the world of Nintendo alive. We've successfully carried the Nintendo Power torch to another major milestone, everyone! Now let's keep this Mario party going even longer, shall we? **— LUCAS**

ISSUE #50:
LONG LIVE
KING KOOPA
+ ADDITION ADDICTION

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ON THE COVER

Nintendo's first major first-party release of 2021 is going to be Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury . . . but we already gave Super Mario 3D World an NF cover way back at the end of 2013! Rather than echo that artwork, we decided to highlight the "+ Bowser's Fury" part of the equation instead. In order to properly convey the depth of anger that the world "fury" evokes, though, we had to do some digging – this especially angry art for the Koopa King is actually a little-seen piece from 2017's Mario Sports Superstars!

JANUARY/
FEBRUARY 2021

INBOX

CELEBRATING BOWSER + A LITTLE SOMETHING EXTRA

Mario didn't start out Super.

He was just a carpenter. Later, a plumber. Really just a regular tradesman who just so happened to once rescue his girlfriend from an ape who climbed a construction site – that was heroic, sure, but nothing that the word "Super" would reasonably describe.

It wasn't until Mario was opposed by a truly sinister villain (not just a goofy gorilla) that he was able to rise above the constraints of his normal self and achieve Super status. Mario would have never become Super Mario . . . if not for Bowser.

Our celebration of the 35th anniversary of Super Mario Bros. continues in this 50th NF issue, and we're shifting the spotlight away from the hero of the series in order to give due praise and appreciation to the foe whose refusal to lose has been the driving force behind that three-and-a-half decade success. King Bowser Koopa is still as dedicated to dastardly deeds today as he first was all the way back in 1985. Even though his schemes have always ended up thwarted in the end!

Perhaps the crushing weight of all those defeats has finally begun to break Bowser's back, and that's why he's now angrier than ever? "Bowser's Fury" is kicking off the 2021 software schedule for Nintendo, and in the pages ahead we'll endeavor to divine just what form his rage is going to take this time.

What's more, we're celebrating Bowser with a full feature looking at all the most important aspects of his curmudgeonly character: "Long Live King Koopa." Then, taking a cue from the "+" in the middle of "Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury," we're also looking at Nintendo's ongoing trend of adding extra content to re-released games in a secondary feature called "Addition Addiction."

Beyond that, the news, previews and reviews you've come to expect, our 2020 Game of the Year Awards, a fresh crop of comics and much, much more!

Mario was spurred on to become Super by facing an enemy who was stronger than he'd ever encountered before. As you read about Bowser in the pages ahead, consider how you yourself have become stronger after overcoming the hardships in your own life! (Even video game bad guys can teach us about ourselves!)

Lucas M. Thomas

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #49: NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER 2020

We closed out our seventh year of NF with one of our weirdest issue names to date: "Peanut Butter & Chocolate!" (Thankfully, feedback has been totally positive, as it seems everyone really can relate to the appeal of that particular flavor combination.) Check out Tony's review of Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity later in this edition!

With the big 5-0 happening this time, our Player's Poll questions were centered on NF itself. We wanted to know when you first began reading our fine publication, and what your favorite issue has been so far. We solicited your advice regarding future potential content additions too, and finally asked for your thoughts on where we went wrong with our front cover coverage, missing out on giving the spotlight to a game that would've been more deserving. Your letters are below, as always!

LETTERS

I actually just got a physical copy of #48 recently as my very first Nintendo Force issue, but I've more or less been following developments around the magazine since its inception after Nintendo Power sadly ended its run. I personally think I started with the best cover! That juxtaposition of the classic Super Mario Bros. black box artwork with the commissioned 3D recreation of it is just brilliant, and I could honestly frame the issue for that alone. And given that I haven't delved into the backlog of magazines quite yet, it's fair to say that this is my favorite thus far! I absolutely loved the comics inside this issue, especially the brilliant one done by Matthew Taranto. **– SUYASH KUMAR**

I've been an NF reader since around March/April. Actually it was the perfect one for me to start off on, because that was the Animal Crossing edition, and man do I love that game! I actually heard about this when the YouTuber Arlo mentioned it in a video. I was unsure at first because I'd never used Patreon, but the magazines are just so good! Out of the five that I own currently (being #45 to #49), I think my favorite has to be #45.

If I'm going to be real, there's really nothing I could ask for you to add because there's so much already and it's just great. If I had to choose a different cover, I'd say Issue #46 should have been Pokémon Mystery Dungeon DX – *but* at the same time that cover kinda got me interested in Xenoblade. (I even hung up the Xenoblade poster!) **– SUPER JAMES 2**

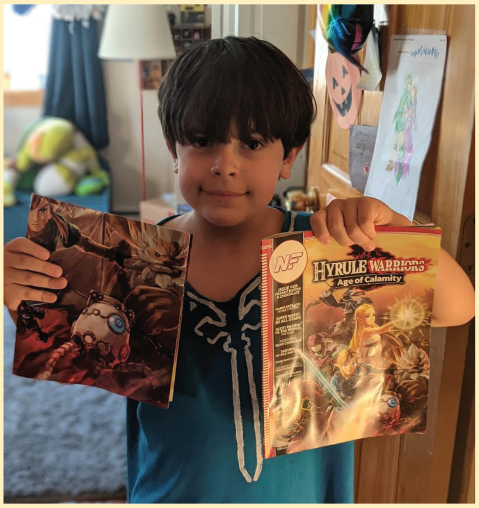
I've been an NF reader since the Samus Returns issue in 2017, and heard about the magazine through Arlo's recommendation on YouTube. I was excited about the upcoming release of a new Metroid, and seeing its artwork plastered on the front of a physical magazine talking all about it and more was incredibly appealing. Three years later, I still look forward to Nintendo coverage showing up in my mailbox.

The issues continue to be full of care and packed to the brim with content. I honestly couldn't think of anything that should be added, but I'm sure if the team thinks of any additions they'll turn out great.

I would have loved to see Link's Awakening get the cover treatment for September of 2019. The remake's reimagined art would have looked beautiful and been fitting as a first-party release, but I respected the cohesive Dragon Quest theme instead. At least Zelda got a poster! **– SAM SEGAL**

I've been reading since 2016. I first heard about the magazine from the Kickstarter you guys ran in the beginning. My favorite issue was #41 because I'm a huge Dragon Quest fan and I enjoyed The Quest for Success! (in the West) feature. **– MARTIN SCHMITZ**

I've always agreed with the cover choices, but if I had to pick, I'd say Ys or The Wonderful 101 could have used more love. What I'm really upset about is that Pokémon Conquest wasn't picked as a Peanut Butter & Chocolate! It combined Pokémon with grid-style



HAPPY SUBSCRIBERS SECTION

Hi Nintendo Force team. My son is a huge fan of your magazine (and posters) and has been pouring over every single page of the latest issue. He is a huge Legend of Zelda fan, so naturally the latest issue and poster has been the highlight of his month. Here he is with them.

As a father I wanted to say thank you for creating a great magazine that is both enjoyable for me and appropriate for kids. Keep up the great work.

Not sure if you do a happy subscribers section in the magazine, but he would be ecstatic to make it in the magazine, even if it's the smallest photo. **– CODY MIX**

Ask and ye shall receive! A "Happy Subscribers" section sounds like a good idea to us, so let's take this opportunity to make that into a real thing!

If you, too, are a happy subscriber (or have one living in your home), feel free to submit your own photos when you write in with your Player's Poll responses!

strategy gameplay like Fire Emblem and historical Japanese figures (who could evolve!). Every Pokémon had one attack and could be viable – some Stage 1's were even better than Legendaries! Nothing could make you break out in a cold sweat like a team of Dratinis. Now that's a cover-worthy Peanut Butter & Chocolate game! **– BEN W.**

The first issue I ever got was #14, and I got it because of a mistake. I found it in my mailbox and I was delighted, as I thought that someone bought me a subscription as a gift. It was actually one of my neighbors' magazines! They had just moved away and (I guess) hadn't changed their mailing address yet. I don't know how it ended up in my mailbox, but I'm glad it did and I subscribed once you guys switched to Patreon. **– DOMINICO**

I can't think of any "misses" for the cover of NF as far as games being passed over. NF does well highlighting the current popular games. However, there is one cover that never appealed to me, and that is Issue #33, the Nintendo Labo cover. There is something about that cover I just find visually unattractive. They can't all be great! **– JASON LEE**

I have been an NF reader since Issue #15, which featured Splatoon on the cover. That was an exciting moment for Nintendo, as Splatoon was the brand-new IP that would take the Wii U by storm and help that console get a little extra push! I first heard about Nintendo Force through a simple Google search. I missed reading Nintendo Power as a kid, so I Googled "Nintendo Magazines" and stumbled upon NF. Little did I know that NF would bring every sense of nostalgia back, from getting a poster in the mail to the letters section and even a review format similar to Nintendo Power! I was so giddy when I first opened that Splatoon issue.

My favorite issue since then has been Issue #33, which featured Nintendo Labo on the cover. I'm a sucker for new peripherals that Nintendo puts out (I'm guilty of buying everything from the DK Bongos to the Wii Zapper), and Nintendo Labo has been one of my all-time favorites. I loved building each of those sets in my living room and looking like a ridiculous human wearing a cardboard robot suit. **– DAVID FISHER**

I'd love a feature where NF staffers make predictions! Even if you're wrong it's still a ton of fun. (Your Mother 3 cover is proof of that!)

I absolutely love the Zelda series, however when it comes to NF covers, I was a little disappointed to see a spin-off series (Warriors) grace your cover three (!) times while mainline entries like A Link Between Worlds and Link's Awakening didn't make the cut. Especially given the beautiful and unique art assets for those two games. **– DYLAN LEE**

I'd love some actual new reviews for older titles. Some reviews of the titles on NES and SNES Switch Online would be great – or just some random older title that doesn't get that much attention but that you believe should. That would also be great. **– PATRICK GADROW**

I feel that Nintendo Force's biggest miss for a cover story could have been this year, with Trails of Cold Steel III. It is a great series that does not get the attention it truly deserves. The theme for that issue could have revolved around jumping into the middle of a series where players may or may not have played earlier games in that series. **– GEORGE LEE**

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 deserves some cover space, as well as a finished playthrough from Lucas! (Do it for Pyra.) **– JOHN KNUDSEN**

It's been three years now . . . should I go back to it, or just wait for Xenoblade Chronicles 2+ to appear at some point in the future? (Maybe they'd fix the weird *font* in a new version.)

DON'T ANGER THE OX

Hey Ox! Which games on NES that never received a sequel would you like to see come out on Switch? Love your magazine! **– @MOUSENO6**

Hm, StarTropics got a sequel . . . Balloon Fight got Balloon Kid . . .

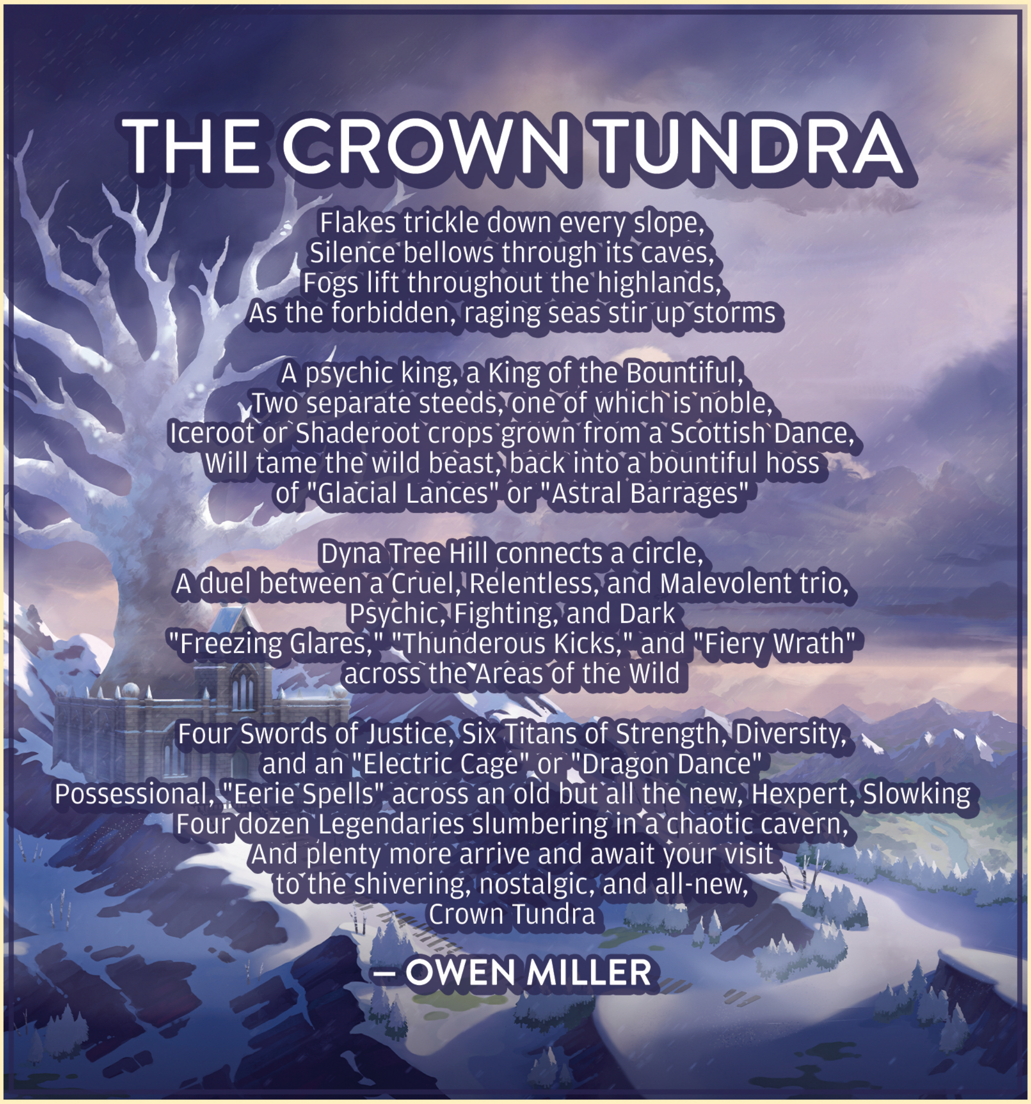
Urban Champion. More than that, I think Ice Climber is long overdue. Remember Rock 'n Roll Climber for the Wii? I don't think anyone cared about that game more than when we all thought it might be an Ice Climber sequel. Give it the DK '94 treatment, says I.

Why can't we have another Kid Icarus? **– @FLUISHZEBRA**

Because Sephiroth turned him into a real one-winged angel, and now he just flies in circles.

Ox, I need your expertise. If you were a betting man, which game would you say will release first: Bayonetta 3 or The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild sequel? **– KING KAIN**

Metroid Prime 4.



THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Patrick Gadrow**, the winner of our last Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to some questions about the subjects we're exploring in this issue!

QUESTION #1

What's one of your fondest memories of big bad Bowser? A story of triumph in a boss fight, perhaps, or another time he really made an impact.

QUESTION #2

What's a game from the past Nintendo still needs to re-release, and what should be added to it if and when they do?

QUESTION #3

Check out our 2020 Game of the Year Awards feature later in this issue, then send us your feedback! What did we get right? What did we get wrong?

Email your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #51" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win a brand-new copy of Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury!

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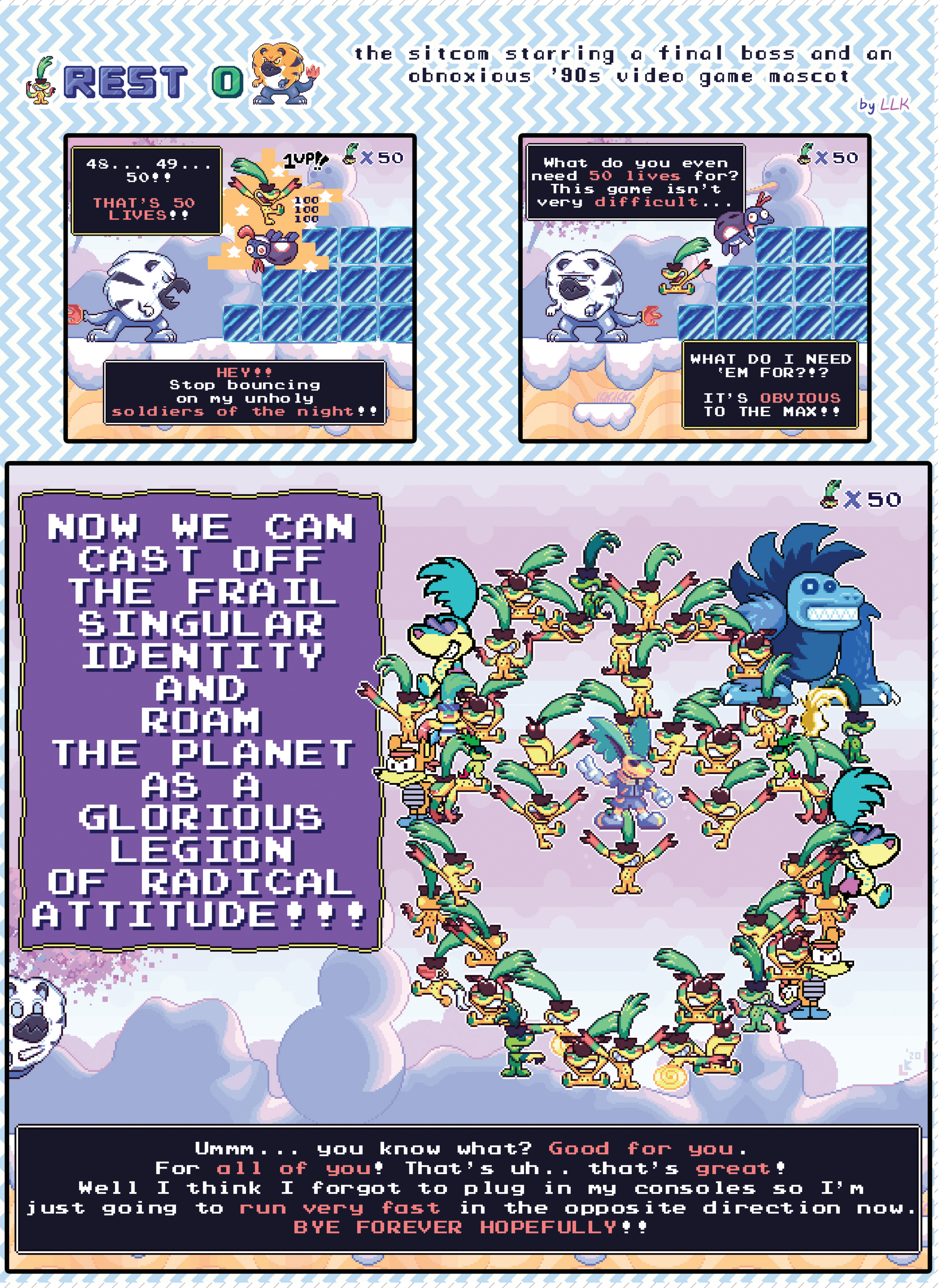
Special thanks to Nicolas for making a brand-new Bowser render for this issue (he posed King Koopa like a turtle for us) and to Nico for recreating Nintendo Power's famous NP50 emblem in NF form, helping us mark our own 50-issue milestone! And please welcome Maggie and John-Charles, who are both officially joining the behind-the-scenes production team!



BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

Race King Koopa…For Real!

The centerpiece of Super Nintendo World will be Koopa's Challenge!

OUR LONGING FOR the world's first Nintendo-themed theme park continues, but now with a finish line finally in sight: opening day! After plans for the park to open last summer were squashed by the virus outbreak around the world, a new start date has been set. Super Nintendo World will open to the public on February 4, 2021! (The Universal Studios Japan version, that is. It'll still be a few years before America gets its locations, in California and Florida.)

Travel to Super Nintendo World in the city of Osaka will be tricky for international fans amidst the ongoing pandemic, and being in the middle of a massive crowd of fellow attendees seems unwise in the current climate as well. Enticing potential customers to brave the danger is none other than Bowser himself, who's now been confirmed to be headlining the primary attraction! Called "Mario Kart: Koopa's Challenge," it's a real-world recreation of a kart race against the Koopa King.

What's more, it's enhanced by AR tech! Riders will wear a headset that will add game graphics to the physical world around them, as well as have the power to attack rival racers in other karts with items like Green Shells and even be able to steer the four-seater karts (to a limited degree).

The ride will be housed inside the full-scale Bowser's Castle we've seen in the concept art for years. I wonder if old King Koopa is prepared for a constant influx of unwelcome guests!

> "I just hope everyone who attends in the park's early days stays healthy! Bowser himself seems ready to scorch anyone seen not wearing a mask right out of his castle!"
> – LUCAS

Soaring Higher

Mario just broke the record at auction . . . again!

JUST TWO ISSUES ago, we reported the record-breaking results of an auction for an original Super Mario Bros. cartridge. A rare variant of the classic game with its 35-year-old shrinkwrap still intact, a cardboard hangtab underneath that plastic and preserved in nearly perfect condition for three and a half decades, it sold for a whopping $114,000. Now, that seems like a steal in comparison!

That same record of "most expensive video game ever sold at auction" has been broken again, and again by Mario – but this time with a unique copy of Super Mario Bros. 3! The 9.2-graded, "A+"-rated copy of Nintendo's now 31-year-old Super Mario sequel was sold by the same company, Heritage Auctions, but brought in much more moolah than its older brother did only a few months ago. The new record now stands at $156,000!

What's going on here? Why has speculation on the future value of these unique mint-condition video game cartridges spiked so severely and so suddenly? Could it be that the massive amount earned from the earlier Super Mario Bros. cartridge sale has triggered a frenzy in this market, and now similar auctions are getting supercharged in response?

To help make sense of the total brought in for this particular piece, take a close look at the logo on the box. See how the "Bros." text is over on the left side, and how it's partially obscuring Mario's hand below it? That's your clue that this is a rare early printing of Super Mario Bros. 3, as the vast majority of boxes produced for the game shifted that "Bros." text over to the right, next to the "3," and avoided overlap with any bit of the iconic Raccoon Mario art. (Now, if you own a Super Mario Bros. 3 box, go run and see if you've got the rare "left" version yourself!) **— LUCAS**

Taron vs. Tetris

Tetris: The Movie has cast its leading man.

LET ME DISPEL your worst fear immediately: No, "Tetris: The Movie" is not going to be some gritty, sci-fi adaptation of the famous puzzle game that involves massive blocks falling out of the sky to crush cities below. That made for a good April Fools gag a few years ago, but the real story should prove to be much more interesting!

Tetris: The Movie will tell the tale of the development and distribution of the simple video game that became a massive global phenomenon. If you're unfamiliar with that tale, well, I hesitate to spoil it since you may want this movie to be the first place you find out what happened! But, in a nutshell, bringing Tetris to the gamers of the world involved a wild series of negotiations that played out in several countries, beginning with the game's point of origin in Russia and, critically, involving years of work in Nintendo's offices in Japan.

The real-life man who made all those connections happen was Henk Rogers, a Dutch game developer who became nearly as important to the Tetris story as the game's actual creator, Alexey Pajitnov. This film will frame these historical events from Rogers' perspective, and actor Taron Egerton has been cast in that leading role. You may have seen him before in films like Rocketman (in which he played Elton John) or the Kingsman series (pictured above).

The tale of Tetris is a fascinating one, and I'm especially excited to see a modern Hollywood interpretation of the Nintendo home offices of the late '80s. I wonder who they'll get to portray young Shigeru Miyamoto, or President Hiroshi Yamauchi? **— LUCAS**

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

"I'll Get Those Plumbers!"

It may not be official, but this King Koopa plush is officially a whole lot of fun.

I AM ADAMANTLY against counterfeit merchandise. You're buying a plush with unknown materials and a potential lack of safety precautions, and who knows where the money goes? Not to Nintendo. If an official plush exists and someone fakes it, it diminishes the value of both and erodes trust in licensed goods, and they're VERY good at it. There's also adapted merchandise where an official pattern is made into something else. First they fake an official Yoshi plush, then change it to be a pouch, pillow or something else.

This King Koopa plush differentiates from a counterfeit in that it's simply unlicensed. There will never be an official version of a plush depicting the look of Bowser from The Super Mario Bros. Super Show!. An unlicensed plush of Toadsworth – of which there is no official version – is troubling because an official one could release at some point. It happened to Toadette and Dry Bowser. This is more like supporting an artist who made a custom plush, but it's from the same manufacturers that likely produce other counterfeit Mario merchandise. While it's shady, it's tough to avoid this one because it's so well done and represents the Bowser I grew up with. This may be one of the only unlicensed goods I pick up – but it's conflicting!

The Perfect Poké Ball

. . . or maybe more of a Luxury Ball, at this price!

2021 MARKS THE 25th anniversary of Pokémon, and to begin the commemoration The Wand Company has created a diecast Poké Ball with a metal shell, lights and proximity and touch technology. This isn't like any Poké Ball you've ever seen before.

For $100 you get the highly accurate Poké Ball and a stand to display it on. The stand has an authentication hologram and number. The top where the ball sits is lit with multiple colors and even a "Pokémon catching light sequence" and is activated with the nameplate. The ball lights up as well, as both the stand and the ball take batteries to operate.

As you approach the ball, it glows slightly, and if you hold both halves of the ball the button glows brightest. It's more complicated than it looks. A ring is hidden in the stand to allow for the ball to be displayed apart from the stand, and it comes with a manual to explain all of the features.

The launch website suggests that this is the first in a potential line of several premium Poké Balls that will pepper 2021 and beyond. With so many unique Poké Balls appearing over the entire series, this style could go quite far if it sells well. This first one releases on February 27. A full collection of these would be impressive! (Or at least six, so you can display a full team!)

Kirby Fans' Dream Land

Kirby's Pupupu Market is open for business!

ON DECEMBER 3, a new store opened inside Kiddyland Umeda in Osaka, Japan – and it's dedicated to Kirby merchandise! Pupupu Market launched with many previously released Kirby goods, but also introduced its own exclusive merchandise. Plushes, tins, clear files and stickers commemorated the opening, and even the store's bags are collectible. The pop-up Kirby cafés were so popular that they received extensions and a sequel, so why not a full store?

Kirby's Pupupu Market will be a permanent store that will feature all of the new Kirby goods moving forward, and even has an apparel section. With Kirby goods coming out at a fast clip – sometimes even multiple releases in a week – it will be tough for the store to keep up, let alone collectors! The Kirby brand is obviously much hotter in Japan than the States, but we do see releases of some of this stuff on our side of the Pacific.

Collector's Corner is compiled by Brett Martin, the world record holder for the largest collection of video game memorabilia on Earth. For more cool collectibles and information on how to order from import shops, visit his site, The Video Game Memorabilia Museum, at videogamemm.com.

amiibo UPDATE

A PAIR OF fine felines are up next in the world of amiibo: Cat Mario and Cat Peach will debut alongside Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury on February 12 in all their "fuzzy" (or dimpled) glory. Then we won't have to wait to long after that for Terry, Banjo & Kazooie and Byleth to take the stage, as their release dates are all locked in for March 26. Beyond that, we await word of further Smash figures . . . like the just-added-to-the-cast Sephiroth!

Add to Your Adventures

Additional LEGO Super Mario sets are now available!

HAPPY NEW YEAR indeed, as new Mario LEGO sets released globally on the first of January featuring Larry Koopa, a Wiggler, a Chain Chomp with Bramball and others. Larry's set comes with the interesting Maker Gadget that changes the way Question Blocks and the time bonus operate. Mario also got new suits, with Penguin Mario and Tanooki Mario being made available. Along with these, another set of buildable baddies: Para-Beetle, Thwimp, Huckit Crab, Parachute Goomba, Foo, Fly Guy, Ninji, Spiny Cheep Cheep, Bone Goomba and Poison Mushroom!

Buy the Bowser Box!

An entire treasure trove of the menacing monarch's merch.

CULTUREFLY HAS REALLY let loose in the past year, releasing six new collector's boxes featuring Mario and Zelda properties. One was Bowser-themed and included a figure of King Koopa himself, along with a Thwomp plush, a canvas print featuring the Koopalings and a Chain Chomp keychain. A duffel bag, socks and even an umbrella all came emblazoned with Bowser's visage as well to round out the box! The slew of merch retails for $30. It's a great way to start a Bowser collection!

Cybercrime Strikes Capcom

A massive data breach has hit the home of Mega Man, Monster Hunter and . . . Herlock Sholmes?

CAPCOM STRUGGLES WITH secrets. It's almost become routine to see new Street Fighter V characters and other announcements leaked ahead of time due to slip-ups and flubs from the publisher and their partners.

Even Nintendo isn't immune! Back in 2016, Ryu's introduction to the world of Smash Bros. was discovered by hackers well before the wandering martial artist's debut trailer aired at that year's E3. Those kinds of spoilers, while often distressing, usually don't lead to any real damage to a company, its employees and their work.

Unfortunately, a theft of data from Capcom's internal servers is much more dangerous. In early November, a group of blackmailers used ransomware to obtain over one terabyte of confidential information on Capcom employees and customers, demanding $11,000,000 in Bitcoin to keep it from being published for the public. The corporation-turned-victim refused to be extorted, so the hackers released the data in a massive dump later in the month.

While what happened to Capcom is terrible, the whole affair ended up revealing their own questionably "less-than-legal" appropriation of an intellectual property. This leak upturned an internal presentation showing off a partially localized Switch port of 2015's The Great Ace Attorney, a lawyer sim starring one of Phoenix Wright's 19th century ancestors. The game also features Sherlock Holmes as a lead, which is no problem in Japan – but in the United States, the rights to the famed investigator are much harder to acquire. That's why, according to these leaked screenshots, Capcom changed the pipe-smoking private eye's name to . . . Herlock Sholmes?!? It doesn't take a master of deduction to figure out where that one came from. The real question is, would it be enough to keep Sherlock's owners from suing?

Also revealed was a list of code names, mapping out Capcom's planned release schedule for the next four years. It includes Resident Evil Outrage, Resident Evil Hunk, Dragon's Dogma 2, Street Fighter VI, Mega Man Match, Monster Hunter 6, Ace Attorney 7, Phoenix Wright Trilogy, Project Guillotine, Onimusha New Work, Biohazard Apocalypse and remakes of Final Fight, Power Stone and Resident Evil 4. But development of some of these tiles had already been leaked. (I told you Capcom wasn't great at keeping secrets!)

> "Many of these leaked games were "elementary" inevitabilities, but it's still exciting to see their existence reaffirmed. Let's just hope these startling "revelations" all end up being the real deal! – **JONATHAN**"

Great!
Capcom's plans for the future are looking exciting!

Oh.
Crime is bad. I hope the culprits get caught!

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

UNSURPRISINGLY, THE MONTH of January is looking light on new releases. Just about every studio out there tries to get their nearly finished games out the door in time for the holiday shopping season each year, so there's always slim pickings left when the calendar flips into the New Year! That reality might help more eyes be drawn to the new Atelier Ryza 2, which is set to arrive on January 26. Read about it on Page 35!

OUR COVER GAME for this January/February edition is set to make its debut on February 12. Memory refreshment about the original Wii U release is available on Page 26 this time, after which we then speculate about possible directions Nintendo could go for the "+ Bowser's Fury" portion of the package. Will we get it right?

ATLUS WAS EITHER in no hurry to announce this one, or else the events of 2020 slowed down the localization process considerably. Whatever the case, Persona 5 Scramble: The Phantom Strikers is finally confirmed to be heading our way with an English-language release! The title has been truncated down to just "Persona 5 Strikers," so don't go searching for "Scramble" when it hits on February 23. Flip to Page 31 for more!

ANOTHER GAME THAT has taken a seemingly leisurely road to release, Bravely Default II is due to drop on February 26. Its developers took their time to finalize its design, tweaking, adding and adjusting bits and pieces of the product after receiving player feedback following last March's eShop demo. Read more about that on Page 33 this time!

THE FRANCHISE FORMERLY known as Harvest Moon is still finding new territory to till, and its next sequel is entitled Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town. (Or "Sospoot," for short.) Have a first look at what it's got planned on Page 35, then prepare for its debut on March 23!

LASTLY, THE MONTH of March will also play host to Capcom's next batch of monsters to hunt! The all-new and surprisingly Switch-exclusive Monster Hunter Rise will begin its rampage on March 26. It's looking promising for both MH series fans and . . . dog lovers? Find out what that's all about over on Page 34!

> "As expected, the difficulties and delays of 2020 are making for a stronger slate of upcoming games for 2021 already. February is particularly packed with that one-two-three punch combo of Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury, Persona 5 Strikers and Bravely Default II. I should be able to finish the first before the second comes out, but there's no way I'll be done "striking" in just three days! That release date's a nasty trick, Joker! — LUCAS"

THE ONE-WINGED ANGEL has arrived!

Speculation surrounding the identity of the third new character in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate's second Fighters Pass had many fans arguing in favor of everyone from Doomguy to Crash Bandicoot, but Sakurai and his team once again hit us with a surprise that nearly no one saw coming: Sephiroth, the iconic villain of Final Fantasy VII, has joined the Smash cast. This was always a possibility since Square Enix had given Nintendo their blessing to add both Cloud Strife and Dragon Quest's Hero to the series before — but it was still considered unlikely since, well, Cloud was already in and it didn't seem like a second character from the same Final Fantasy game would be prioritized over giving representation to another new company or franchise.

However it happened, he's here! He's a big boost to the villain roster in the game, as arguably the most legendary video game bad guy who was not already in the cast. We're putting him through his paces now, and we'll have our full evaluation of his evil in our next edition!

Unmaking Mario Maker

The original Super Mario Maker on Wii U is being phased out – and it's not alone.

IT'S MARCH MADNESS for Mario!

In late November, Nintendo delivered the kind of news that you're only used to hearing from publishers like EA: A long-supported and beloved game will be delisted and have its eShop release jettisoned into space. That game is Super Mario Maker, and the day is March 31, 2021.

Yes, that's the original Super Mario Maker on the Wii U, from 2015. Not the Switch sequel. Phew! (Sorta.)

Now, it had a good run, and the sequel is mostly carrying on its legacy (with a few missing features, even to date), but it's still surprising to hear that levels will no longer be able to be uploaded, ranked or bookmarked. All of that work will no longer be able to be iterated or tweaked!

Super Mario Maker was a cultural phenomenon for years, whipping plucky level creators into shape and helping them go viral across all forms of social media. It was an exciting time – a brief period in which the Wii U was relevant again, after being somewhat forgotten. (It'll always remain one of my favorite Nintendo systems!) Then the Switch came out and Nintendo, along with almost everyone else, moved on.

But Super Mario Maker isn't the only game getting the axe on March 31. Nintendo has previously confirmed that Super Mario Bros. 35, the new Mario Game & Watch device and Super Mario 3D All-Stars (both digital and physical!) are going away too.

Look, I "get" the idea behind vaulting All-Stars. Nintendo is a wily company not unlike Disney when it comes to limited edition releases: Anyone remember the exclusive Fire Emblem Fates cart that had all three stories on it? Well, it's going for $200 or more in some places. This is not new.

Super Mario Bros. 35, on the other hand, is a different case for multiple reasons. First, its chief purpose is adding value to the Switch Online ecosystem, which has frankly been lacking in recent months. If it's taken off the service, subscribers will have even fewer perks. Imagine if Nintendo took Tetris 99 away! That game is still getting interesting updates over a year after its release. I don't think anyone would stand for it being removed at this point, given the time investment involved. While SMB35 hasn't had nearly the same amount of love, a lot of folks have still been toiling away at ranking up and have unlocked quite a few bits and pieces. If the game gets its plug pulled, all of that is gone.

Nintendo also doesn't stand to lose a whole lot by taking a wholly digital game offline entirely. If you're trying to get people to panic-buy a premium $60 release that exists in physical form, it makes sense. But other than server costs, Nintendo isn't exactly hurting here if the whole point is to add value to Switch Online.

But wait, there's more! Mario isn't the only one who will be doomed on March 31, as Nintendo has announced that Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon & the Blade of Light will only be available "for a limited time." How limited? Well, try March 31, 2021.

Don't get too hopeless though, as there's a light at the end of the tunnel. For weeks Nintendo claimed that the Jump Rope Challenge app on Switch would meet a similar fate, only to extend its life indefinitely on September 29 – one day before it was scheduled to be destroyed. Literally the day before! So while Nintendo is sticking to this "vault" plan for now, anything is possible. Let's hope they change course – otherwise they'll look like fools on April 1. **– CHRIS**

Cloud Control

Does this really count as a Switch game?

CLOUD GAMING IS the way of the future! At least, that's what companies such as Google, Amazon and Microsoft would like you to believe. As it just so happens, Nintendo is no stranger to cloud gaming, either – if you live in Japan. There, titles such as Resident Evil VII and Assassin's Creed Odyssey have been available to Switch owners (as "cloud editions") for some time now.

It's been one of those press-your-face-against-the-glass moments of wanting what we can't have for some gamers. But the wait is now over! Power Players in the West are now able to experience the joy of playing games made to run on much more powerful hardware in the palm of their hands, all without the need to scale it down.

These games don't run on your Switch itself. Rather, the software plays on a distant PC – one that is computationally more powerful than the Switch – and the video feed from that machine is piped to your portable/TV screen via the Internet. The end result is making it seem like the Switch is able to handle more complex games than it really can.

Remedy Entertainment's Control Ultimate Edition is the first cloud-based game to be released in North America as of this writing, and it will be followed by Hitman 3 from IO Interactive, likely launching in January.

There is, of course, a bit of a catch. As Nintendo's website says of Control: "This game uses cloud streaming technology, and you require a persistent high-speed Internet connection to play the game. If your Internet connection becomes unstable, the service will disconnect after a few minutes." Fortunately, you can download a free launcher for a limited time that will allow you to "test the availability and quality of the service for your region."

Cloud gaming hasn't been without its hiccups. When it works, it seems to work best when you're near a Wi-Fi source, thus negating one of the Switch's greatest benefits: its portability. Then there's the matter of online infrastructure, which quite frankly stinks in some places. The success or failure of these first few titles should clue us in as to whether this idea will have a future on Switch! **– DAVID**

Doomed to Digital

DOOM Eternal's cartridge release has been slain.

GOOD NEWS, EVERYONE! DOOM Eternal is now available for your Switch!

Potentially bad news, depending on your data plan, bandwidth and ability to store another 18 gigabytes of data on your console: It's digital only.

A slight scare back in November saw GameStop canceling many a pre-order for the popular first-person shooter, leading some to fear that the game itself was cancelled. That would not be the case – only the physical copies were canned.

Unfortunately, there isn't really any information as to *why* this major-name release was suddenly shifted to become an eShop exclusive in the 11th hour. Are demons immune to the repugnant taste of Nintendo Switch game cards, and simply downed the entire supply like so many Pringles? Has the digital revolution completely overtaken the legions of armchair Doom Slayers out there, and they figured going physical simply wasn't worth the investment after looking at sales figures for the previous title? Is Bethesda a collaborator on the long-rumored Nintendo Switch Pro, which would be so powerful that it could only be energized by the power channelled through a gateway to, er, *Heck* via the game cards, leading to DOOM Eternal being embedded in every Switch Pro motherboard? Or might there be something else?

Maybe Occam was right, and the simplest answer is the correct one. So let's look at the facts: DOOM Eternal was initially released on other platforms back in March – right about the time COVID was starting to really change the world. Of course, any physical copies released then would have had to have been made at some point in advance, well *before* all the shutdowns and isolating fun began.

So it *might* be possible that with the Switch's later release date – only properly announced 10 days after the pre-order cancellations, and eight days before its December 8 release – that for whatever reason, something in the supply line of the cartridges got choked up, and they simply had to abandon the retail ship.

However, that may not necessarily spell "doom" for those who want a copy of the game to go on their shelf. While nothing has been announced, Bethesda may have gone forward with releasing the digital version now with an eye towards revisiting a physical release later. If the demand is there, of course! **– DAVID**

The Grape of No Wrath

Protect the peace on a cozy and inviting island in Garden Story.

ARE YOU RIPE for adventure? If so, then Picogram's upcoming game Garden Story — featuring an adorable grape protagonist — may be just for you.

In Garden Story, you'll take on the role of Concord, a young grape who's recently been appointed as the newest Guardian of The Grove. Concord is tasked with helping restore their island home . . . after the invasive Rot has creeped in.

The game combines several farming sim and action RPG elements. There's no shortage of enemies to fight, tasks to complete and new friends to help on your journey.

As Concord, you'll get to explore The Grove's four separate regions, each with a distinctive style. One area is the community of Autumn Town, which includes yellow and orange harvest themes and was featured in a Steam demo.

Other tasks include completing favors for The Grove's many residents, solving puzzles, collecting resources, combating the Rot with a varied arsenal, upgrading tools and weapons and uniting the regions' fruit, fungi and frog inhabitants.

Players can also change the environment of the regions by gardening and rebuilding structures in the individual towns.

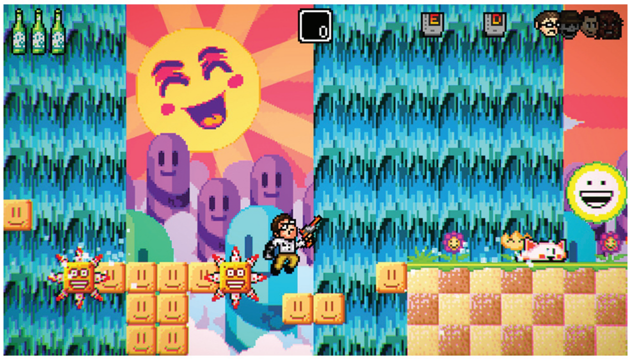
You won't be alone in your efforts, either. Concord's friends Elderberry, Rana and Fuji will offer their aid, and as you complete quests, other Grove residents will pitch in and help you along the way.

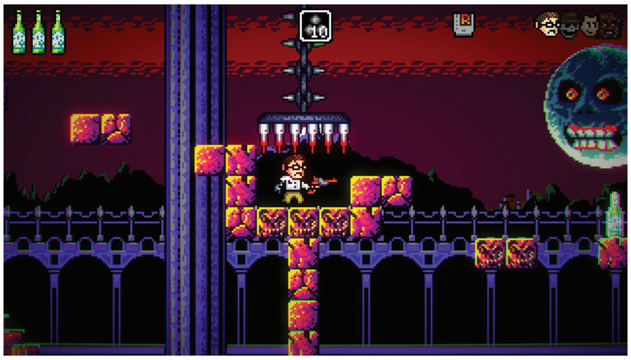
In its Switch announcement trailer, the world of Garden Story looks adorable and full of life with its pixel style and pastel color scheme. (Even the Rot looks almost too sweet to smack.) It's a bit reminiscent of Stardew Valley, but the visuals stand out with the game's cute, bouncy residents and variety of environments you can explore.

Garden Story's music enhances its charming aesthetic further with relaxing tunes featuring guitar, piano and accordion.

Picogram began working on Garden Story in 2018, and the game was announced for Switch at the Nintendo Indie World Showcase last August.

Garden Story is set to hit Switch and Steam sometime in 2021. If you're a fan of farming sims or action RPGs, this one may just need to crop up on your radar! — **MAGGIE**





Anger Mismanagement

ANGRY VIDEO GAME NERD I & II DELUXE

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SCREENWAVE MEDIA DEVELOPER: FREAKZONE GAMES RATING: M

HE'S GONNA TAKE you back to the past . . . 2013, to be precise.

That's when the original Angry Video Game Nerd Adventures was released, with a Wii U port arriving in 2015 and a sequel hitting PC the following year. We gave the original on Wii U an 8.0 back then, and eagerly anticipated a chance to play the sequel on our hardware of choice. So we waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. We waited so long, there must have been three, maybe four day-to-night transitions from Castlevania II: Simon's Quest that occurred in the meantime.

Now, five years later, it's finally here. And it didn't come alone!

Not only is the sequel, Angry Video Game Nerd II: Assimilation available on Nintendo Switch, but it has the prequel in tow as well, just in case you somehow missed it. What's more, both games have effectively been remastered in Unity, allowing for a little more polish and added effects that weren't there before to make everything feel just a bit more on-brand and narratively cohesive, and there's even an all-new epilogue available when you beat both games.

According to the developers, these are the definitive versions. As such, maybe all the weird rights issues, company acquisitions and other things that led to its delayed arrival were ultimately a good thing?

The way the package is set up, you've got nine save files for your Switch profile, and each takes you through both games before unlocking the final chapter. However, before you play those, you'll have to choose your difficulty, which affects the whole lot and can't be changed midway. That means that if you've already played and beaten the first game and want to get to the new stuff, you can't just blast through it on an easier difficulty and up the challenge for the rest. It's all or nothing here. That said, you can just skip right to the sequel, or bounce between the two as you please.

Options are plentiful, as accessibility was something that they really wanted to bring to the table in this package. In addition to your normal things like sound volume and music volume, there's a photosensitive mode for those who can't handle lots of flashing lights, as well as the ability to disable screen shaking.

Beyond that, there are six of the aforementioned difficulty levels, with Easy and Normal even offering unlimited lives. And trust me, you'll need them – especially in the sequel (according to the death counter at the end of the game, I lost more than 100 lives throughout the adventure).

In terms of gameplay, the original reminds me a lot of the first Mega Man, though the Nerd has a bit more momentum to him that can make some precise platforming parts extra torturous. Following on from that, the sequel opts for a more Mega Man X-styled approach, even going so far as to allow the Nerd to gain upgrades, including loafers that allow him to wall jump like X. The permanent upgrades – each inspired by different Nintendo peripherals such as the Power Pad, NES Max and Super Scope – are a welcome change from the power-ups of the first, which disappear once you take a hit, making them extremely short-lived in their usefulness.

Angry Video Game Nerd I & II Deluxe is fun, funny, frequently frustrating and definitely not for kids. If you have a fondness for "Nintendo hard" games or just love the Nerd, give this one a try. **– DAVID**

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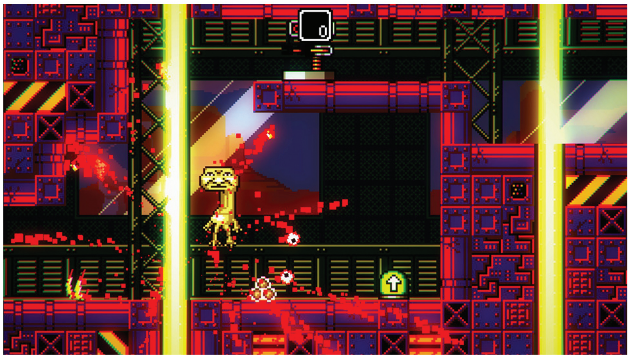
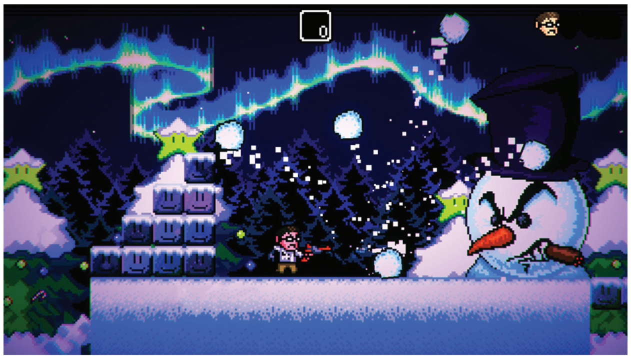




Land of the Legends

POKÉMON SWORD & SHIELD

EXPANSION PASS, PART 2: THE CROWN TUNDRA

THE MAIN CAMPAIGN in Sword & Shield was awfully light on Legends. You could catch the one pictured on the box of the version you chose (Zacian in Sword or Zamazenta in Shield), but beyond that only one more Legendary Pokémon could be encountered in the story. Likewise, a single new Legend could be found on the Isle of Armor: Kubfu. It could at least evolve into Urshifu (which did help the problem a bit) but overall these games, up through the first part of their DLC, have been lacking in truly rare and epic creatures.

No longer! Now that the second part of the Sword & Shield Expansion Pass DLC has gone live, it's clear that Legends really can be found in Galar. They're just all in the Crown Tundra!

DLC PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK
RATING: E

The Crown Tundra is absolutely packed with Legendary Pokémon. Every single Legend from the past seven generations' worth of journeys is here somewhere, and they're joined by *eight* all-new creatures newly added to that same category. Including a couple that weren't revealed via trailers or other marketing ahead of time, so there was a pair of "Who's *that* Pokémon?" moments while playing through this quest. (That's always my favorite feeling when playing these games.)

Following on after the style of free-roaming exploration we first saw in Galar's Wild Area and then again across the whole expanse of the Isle of Armor, the Crown Tundra is another go-anywhere zone that gives you full camera control and just turns you loose to wander. The environment here mixes wintry snowscapes with rain-drenched grasslands, all crisscrossed with twisted caverns and dotted with key points of interest where Legendary Pokémon make their home. It's one more tiny step in the direction of a future series sequel that will surely present an entire region in this same open-world manner, and I'm looking forward to seeing that happen!

They just need to make the wild Pokémon behave more naturally in that inevitable installment – once again, the monsters here just pop out of thin air as you walk or ride your bike around, and then just mill around in circles doing nothing until you begin a battle with them or pass them by. I'd love to see real animal behaviors in the future! Let's see Deerlings that cautiously approach a lake for a sip of water, but then get spooked and run away if they hear you coming. Let's see Digletts that really burrow into and out of the ground, visibly disturbing the dirt. Let's have Flying-types that actually fly way up in the sky instead of just hovering in place three feet up!

. . . Forgive me for straying from the topic at hand. Playing through The Crown Tundra just once again has me feeling like Game Freak is edging ever closer to really turning a corner into something magical with this series. It's not there yet. But it's getting there!

For what it offers now, though, The Crown Tundra is great. The core of the quest here centers on a new character, Peony, who is on the hunt for all of this area's Legends. You partner with him and he sends you to seek out Calyrex, the bulb-headed rabbit who turns out to be a king; the three "Regis" originally seen back in Pokémon Ruby & Sapphire, along with two new members of their group: Regieleki and Regidrago; and the franchise's first-ever Legendary trio of Articuno, Zapdos and Moltres, all of whom have been given new Galarian forms with fresh type combinations and brand-new signature moves. All together, these would have been enough to carry this DLC.

8.5

But Peony's quests are just the beginning! As I mentioned earlier, all of the series' past Legends are here, so there are dozens more to find after the story-driven 'mons are all safely stored in your Boxes. Sonia, returning from the main game, gives you a quest to find scattered footprints that ultimately leads you to capture Gen V's Legendary trio of Cobalion, Terrakion and Virizion (with Keldeo to boot as a Mythical bonus). Peony's daughter Peonia, meanwhile, hangs out in the Crown Tundra's Max Lair, a subterranean quest hub that strings together four Max Raid Battles in a row in a test of your Pokémon's endurance. Well, not *your* Pokémon – that would be too easy. No, you're forced to use rental monsters to tackle Max Lair trials, which means you'll have to actually be strategic about your choices instead of just powering through with your endgame squad! If you succeed, you'll score a new Legend for your collection – from Gen VII's still-fresh faces like Tapu Koko all the way back to good old Mewtwo!

Hilariously, the Max Lair is open for business immediately after you first set foot in the Crown Tundra – and you can do that incredibly early in the main game, if you want. Most players will tackle this DLC after having already cleared the core story and probably the Isle of Armor's tale as well, but I tested out the opposite extreme approach, and it worked! I started a brand-new save file and was able to go to the Crown Tundra with only a Sobble (and the Galarian Slowpoke that you're forced to catch at the train station). I then entered the Max Lair, finished a run there and added Suicune to my squad! Level 12 Sobble, Level 12 Slowpoke, Level 70 Suicune. Less than one hour into the run. (I wonder how the speedrunning community will take advantage of that!)

Your enjoyment of The Crown Tundra will largely depend on how much you like Legendary Pokémon, as it seems they were held back from the main game in order to make a greater impact here. Filling your Pokédex with all of the franchise's heaviest hitters makes for a fine finale for the Sword & Shield saga. Now I'm once again eager to see where the games go next! **– LUCAS**

SECOND OPINION

CARTER'S TUNDRA TRAVELOGUE

THIS PLACE LOOKS COLD!

When I took my first step into the Crown Tundra, I battled a Steel-type Trainer, Peony. I beat him easily. After that, his daughter ran toward the Max Lair. I couldn't catch Suicune, though. Then I followed Peony to Freezington. Then I found Calyrex. I beat it. Then it used Peony's voice to talk to me. But I ran into the rest of the Crown Tundra. And I caught Regirock!

Later in the game I caught Registeel, Regice and Regidrago. Why did I not catch Regieleki? Because you can only catch Regieleki *or* Regidrago – not both.

What about the big new birds? Articuno is now a Psychic/Flying-type with a new move: Freezing Glare. Zapdos switched to Fighting/Flying-type and got a move called Thunderous Kick. Moltres (now a little like Dry Bowser) switched to Dark/Flying and got the move Fiery Wrath! Moltres is my favorite of all the birds, so I got it first.

Time for a flashback! When I was about to go to the open Crown Tundra, I saw footprints. And then guess who came rushing toward me? Sonia! "What are you doing here?" she asked. "What are *you* doing here?" I asked. Sonia said the footprints are for a Legendary trio and she asked if I could find the Legendaries. These Legendaries are known as Cobalion, Terrakion and Virizion. I was just excited to see Yamper!

Now, it's time to talk Calyrex, a Psychic/Grass-type, who is the King of the Crown Tundra. It rides on two new Legendary horses: Glastrier and Spectrier. Can you catch Calyrex? Of course! You can catch Calyrex riding on Glastrier or Calyrex riding on Spectrier. Like Regieleki and Regidrago, you have to pick just one of them. Your Calyrex will be a Psychic/Ice-type if you choose Glastrier, or a Psychic/Ghost-type if you pick Spectrier, with new moves Glacial Lance and Astral Barrage, respectively.

I hereby declare this report done! Finally, let's play a guessing game. How many Level 100s do I have in Pokémon Shield? I'll tell you next issue! I'm done exploring now, but in the Crown Tundra, I had a blast! **– CARTER**

9.5

6.5

The Clash Continues

KIRBY FIGHTERS 2

KIRBY FIGHTERS ORIGINATED in 2014's Kirby: Triple Deluxe, where it was more of a fun player vs. player minigame tacked onto the main game. Then it got a Deluxe version (more on that later in this issue), and Kirby Fighters 2 has now arrived to solidify Fighters as its own series.

The game has five modes. Battle Mode is a lot like Smash Bros., in that a player can battle three CPUs or face off against couch co-op players in teams or free-for-all for a quick round of fighting. Most of the fighters here are Kirbys with various Copy Abilities, but some frenemies join the fray, like Magalor. Online Battle takes this same premise online against random opponents, and Local Mode allows multiple Switches to be used.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: VANPOOL & HAL LABORATORY RATING: E

Players have to unlock the majority of the fighters the game makes available, and most of the Kirbys are unlocked by raising your level. This isn't necessarily the fastest process, but it gives players a chance to play with the new Abilities as they're unlocked. Training Mode helps you learn the moves. The best place to unlock things is Story Mode, so most players will head there first, as stages and fighters are initially limited in other modes.

Story Mode has your fighter and a buddy (who can be played by a second player) climbing a tower where each floor is a battle with one or more foes. Between each battle players get to pick a buff or a healing item, and health is carried over between matches. Early battles are often laughable and against weirdly named foes like the "Famished Artist." The adjectives are truly odd.

Things can get tough in some stages due to stage hazards, and items continuously spawn at a high rate and can often turn the tide of battle. It's utter chaos and can be difficult to find your fighter.

Where the game loses sight of its demographic is when trying to unlock the likely most-coveted characters Meta Knight and King Dedede. You get infinite continues to unlock Meta Knight, but King Dedede requires beating the final chapter with a limited number of lives and no continues. In order to pull this off you have to memorize enemy attacks and perform quite well, as even easier battles can throw you off if you're outmanned. Getting into the high floors and having to start over is immensely frustrating, so the game does not respect the player's time (and being a Dad with multiple children, game time is fleeting).

Kirby Fighters 2 is exciting at first, but quickly loses its luster. Unlocking is frustrating and the online modes can have connectivity issues. The time sink is a big problem, and the $20 price tag may deter many since it's such a simplistic game. Super Kirby Clash is a much better title, and it's free! It's odd that Nintendo didn't use a similar pricing structure for this unexpected sequel. **— BRETT**

8.0

Through the Fire and Flames

HADES

"ROGUELIKE" IS SUCH a bad word for some that I can see the Drake "no thanks" meme in my head as I recommend them to people. But "Rogue*lite*"? Turn that Drake frown upside down! Hades is one of those games that excels at effortlessly beckoning its casual players back, no matter how hopeless a run may seem. The fact that it can manage that – in spite of a lot of rote routine – is impressive.

Supergiant's developers are great at what they do: creating captivating, visually breathtaking adventures. Hades is another game in a string of beautiful-looking games. From its pronounced, at times anime-esque character designs to its bright and inviting locales, Hades is a stunner, even on Switch in portable mode (in fact, I played most of my "true ending" playthrough portably).

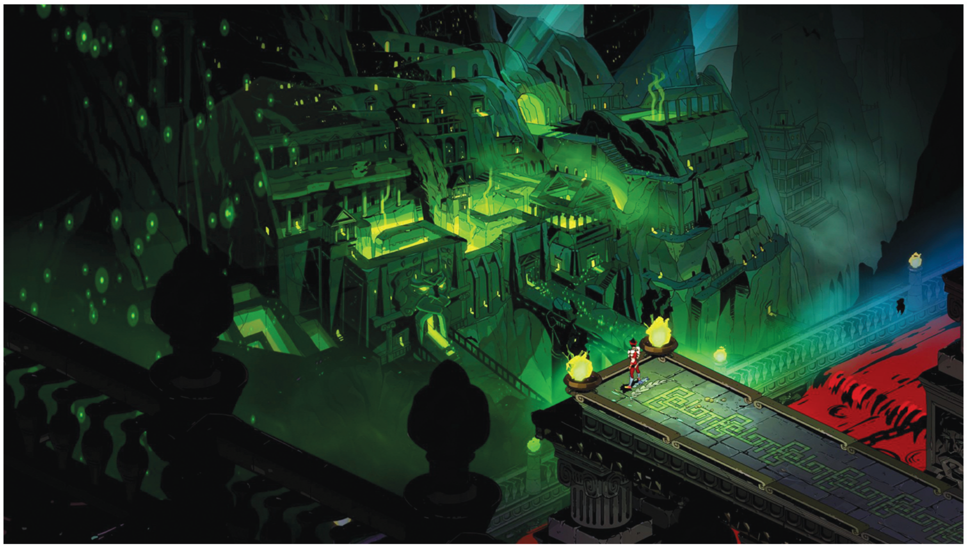
The setup begs for a roguelike framework, actually. Zagreus, the son of Hades, needs to claw his way out of the underworld and onto Mount Olympus, where the rest of his family resides. What comes next, peppered throughout every run ever so subtly, is a series of dramatic familial conflicts that eventually fill in the big picture surrounding Zagreus and his immediate/extended family tree. Some runs you'll get basically nothing; others you'll get everything. It's the nature of the genre, compounded by the enhanced focus on narrative.

That's partially why Hades is so addictive. In each run you'll acquire a new morsel of story, but this is where the "lite" (generally, more relaxed) part of the descriptor comes in. You know those roguelikes where you can pick up new powers or enhancements each run, so that you'll eventually become strong enough to will out? Hades is one of those games, much to the delight of folks who typically hate the idea of starting all over after each death. That treadmill is the driving force, which extends all the way through the (tedious grind) of acquiring every character interaction; and even the true ending, which involves beating the final boss multiple times.

There is a big push to make all those new journeys fresh though: the "Heat" system. In short, it's a big checklist of punishing parameters you can toggle (like making enemies more damaging or protected) that in turn earn you sweeter rewards after completing a run. My absolute favorite is the ability to essentially pump up bosses, creating completely new encounter mechanics and turning those fights on their heads. This is on top of the light hub customization system and the multi-weapon gameplay, where you can find your favorite playstyle gradually over time. (The shield, oddly enough, is one of the most new-player-friendly options!)

While even the Heat mechanic does feel grindy and samey at times, Hades really gets by on its combat system. The blazing fast dodge is the crux of it all, allowing players to feel speedy and powerful as they dart around the battlefield and narrowly avoid projectiles and melee attacks. Once you start to experiment with the dash-based abilities that add more charges and different effects to your ability to dodge (like reflecting projectiles), it can start to get a little crazy and spammy. But that's where the Heat system comes in: to self-punish if you're learning too quickly.

For me, Hades was give and take. It shares some of the same burdens as others of its ilk, but soars with its presentation, which holds it all together. It's a great way to spend a weekend as you get sucked into its (under)world. **– CHRIS**



SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SUPERGIANT GAMES RATING: T

Alien Contract Labor

PART TIME UFO

DID YOU EVER want to be a UFO, but you just couldn't commit to it full-time? If so, then HAL has the game for you!

As Jobski, a UFO who appears to be more of a sentient being in its own right than a mere conveyance for alien life forms (and bears more than a passing resemblance to Kirby's UFO form with an added antenna), you're tasked with taking on a multitude of jobs that call for a spacecraft with your certain set of skills. Those skills, of course, include the ability to defy gravity, allowing you to grab and move things with the large claw that extends from your underside.

Part Time UFO is a physics-based puzzle game with a charming retro aesthetic (the kind you expect from HAL), and it wastes no time in getting right to the point. Before you even see the title screen, you're placed in a scenario in which you need to help a farmer reclaim some oranges that have spilled from the back of his truck. Controls are as simple as can be, with the left analog stick moving Jobski, and using the A or B buttons (or the corresponding buttons on your controller configuration of choice) to lower your claw to grab an item – much like the Japanese UFO catcher crane games that no doubt inspired this title.

Rather than claiming plush toys, electronics or whatever else as the prize for your hard work, you instead get paid a sum of cash, with the amount increasing with the more sub-tasks you manage. These sub-tasks can range from beating the clock to arranging everything in just the way your client desires, to going above and beyond in cases where there are more pieces to move than is strictly necessary.

With your hard-earned money, you can buy various outfits for Jobski to wear on the job. These can affect the way you move, such as granting more momentum to your swings, quicker speed, faster braking, etc., that may be useful for particular tasks. There's a lot of these to get, too, including one that makes Jobski look like Qbby from HAL's BOXBOY! series. (He makes a number of cameos throughout the game, as do Kirby characters like Meta Knight, King Dedede and the Pink Puffball himself.)

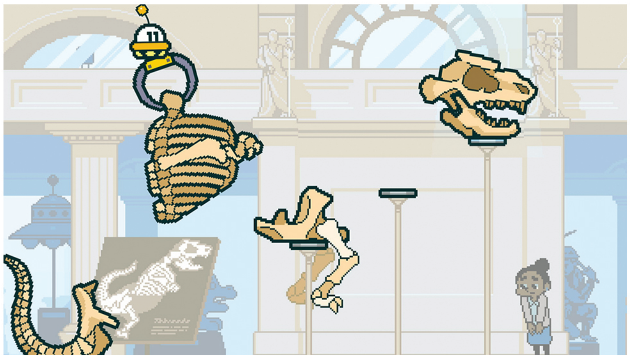
In addition to unlocking outfits, you can also unlock "UFO Memories" by accomplishing "Feats of Glory," which are basically achievements with attached animations. What's more, the game has a social media sharing option that links up to the Switch's function, rewarding you with further illustrations when you do (or don't) share your latest victory.

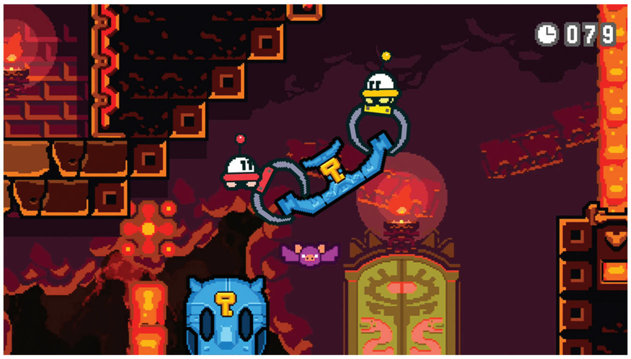
If one UFO doesn't seem like enough for the job, you can bring on a partner to help out. And unlike some titles, this isn't a separate mode, but counts towards the main campaign. With that said, the puzzles do change a bit to accommodate two people. In the orange truck tutorial, for instance, the basket is wider and more suited for needing two UFOs to pick it up, as well as more objects scattered around on the whole. And despite the mode showing each player with a single Joy-Con, you can still use Pro Controllers or two pairs of Joy-Cons, however you like.

Once you've mastered the claw game, there are additional modes to test your skills, too.

This UFO gig may be part-time work, but it's full-time fun! (Wait, what do you mean Nintendo already used that same joke?) **– DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY
RATING: E10+





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Before the Beginning

YS ORIGIN

IF YOU KNOW anything about the Ys series, it's probably that its hero is a red-haired, sword-wielding warrior named Adol Christin. These action RPGs have taken players on adventures with Adol since their start in 1987, as he travels to varied lands and meets new allies and enemies.

But every epic story has to start somewhere, and that's where Ys Origin comes in! This prequel was first published in 2006 on PC, and since then it's landed on PlayStation Vita, PS4, Xbox One and, most recently, the Switch. It takes place 700 years before Adol's first quest and features different protagonists – so you don't need prior knowledge of the series to understand the plot.

At the start, players choose between two playable characters with different fighting styles and personalities: Yunica Tovah, an optimistic axe-slinging knight apprentice who hits hard and fast, and Hugo Fact, an analytical spellcaster who blasts magic and fights more at a distance. Yunica and Hugo offer separate perspectives throughout Ys Origin's narrative, so to get the game's full story, you'll need to take them both for a spin. (Also, once you complete one of their playthroughs, a third protagonist becomes available that adds even more depth to the plot.)

Getting through these three perspectives isn't a particularly tall order thanks to Ys Origin's premise and length. A single playthrough will take around 12 hours to complete, as the game is set in just one location: Darm Tower, a spiraling 25-floor building full of enemies and secrets.

Ascending the tower and locating Ys' twin goddesses are your goals while fighting monsters, finding items and dashing and jumping through obstacles. This repetitive gameplay loop provides Ys Origin's greatest strengths . . . and weaknesses.

The game's combat is a high point. You can hack, slash and blast to your heart's content with weaker enemies that make up most of your opposition. Even though they don't require much strategy, these fights never felt stale to me due to the variety of enemies present.

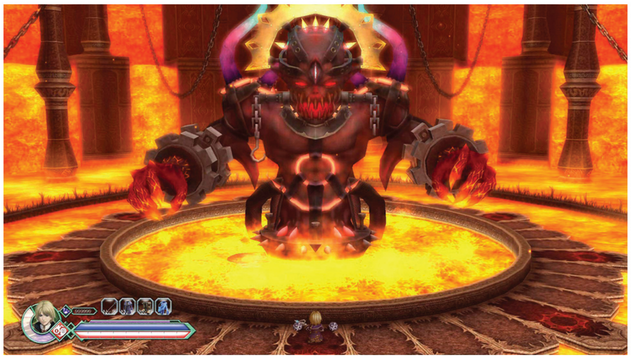
The boss fights are a different story. These vicious foes aren't forgiving in the slightest, and you should prepare to die a few times before figuring out a suitable plan to beat them. Despite their difficulty, I never felt these fights were unfair. You need patience to beat them, as well as time devoted to grinding to get a few levels higher.

The variety of enemies matches the locales you experience in Darm Tower. You'll encounter desert sands, underwater areas, pools of lava and more, which keeps the setting fresh.

Navigating through these areas presents the most frustrating aspects of the game, however. While Ys Origin has an autosave feature, it's rarely used, so you have to rely on a fixed number of save points. While exploring, if you happen to die before you reach the next available save point, you're returned to the previous one. All progress is lost, including gear you've found and enemies you've fought. This, and the lack of a map beyond a list of the tower's floors in its menu, make Ys Origin frustrating in unnecessary ways. Having to repeatedly explore the same areas either because you died or got lost causes the game's pacing to stagnate and hampers its intriguing story.

Despite these flaws, Ys Origin's Switch port both looks and performs well. The game is a bit easier to navigate in TV Mode, but either way, it serves as a fine way to get your feet wet with Falcom's long-running series. **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DOTEMU
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RATING: T



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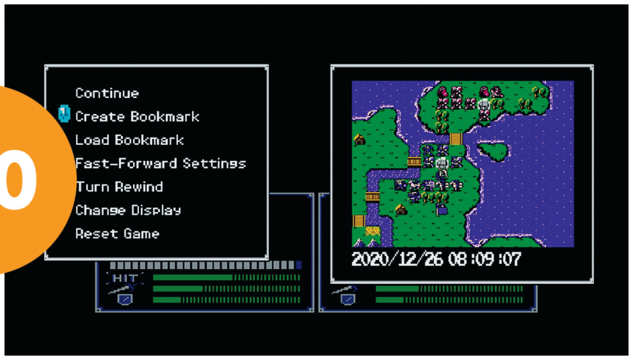


Lost in Untranslation No More

FIRE EMBLEM: SHADOW DRAGON & THE BLADE OF LIGHT

FULL DISCLOSURE: I am a complete Fire Emblem newbie. The only experience I ever had with the franchise was playing Fire Emblem Heroes back when it first came out. But when I heard Nintendo was releasing a new localization of the original Fire Emblem – shockingly giving us the 1990 NES experience we never got before – I decided it was time to right that wrong.

When it was first released for the Famicom over 30 years ago, no one knew Fire Emblem would blaze a trail that would continue across eight different systems and inspire not only three decades of sequels, but also copycat franchises like Disgaea and Final Fantasy Tactics. But finally playing this origin point now really made me realize the reason why.

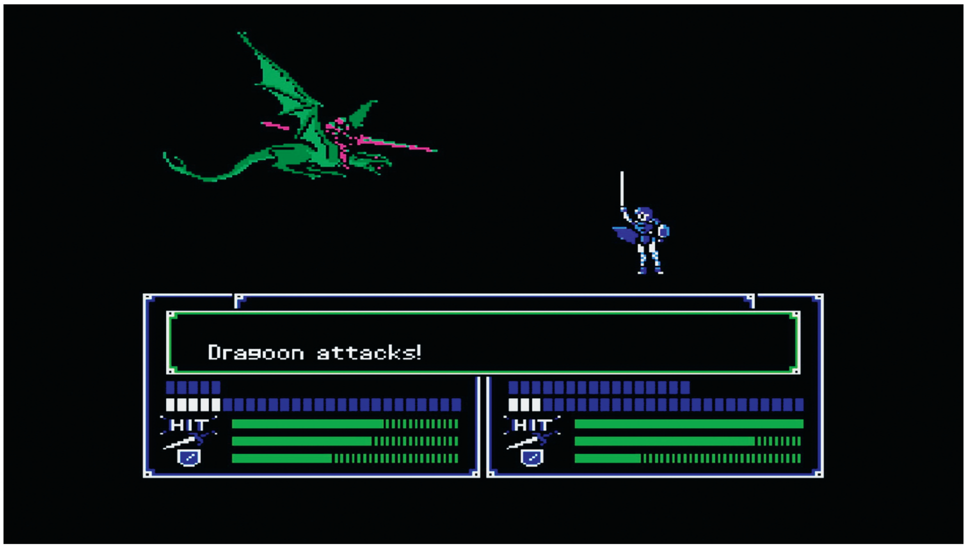
The presentation is fairly simple: After a brief dialogue sequence to set each mission into motion, you and the enemy take turns moving units, attacking and defending against attacks. Defeat the enemy before they defeat you (and hopefully before reinforcements can be summoned), and have your leader, the destined young prince Marth, reach the castle or the throne to win the battle.

Unlike modern games, there are no color-coded areas of movement or attack range, so you'll be taking some time getting a feel for combat and movement at the beginning. Your weapons and items also have limited uses before they break, which will sometimes leave your recruits dead in the water, and healers will need to be in the line of fire in order to level up, which can get pretty dangerous. Also, since this is Fire Emblem, your units are going to die. *A lot.* You'll be spending a lot of time not only protecting Marth, but also healers, mages and thieves, and losing some party members means being frozen out of recruiting someone in the future as well.

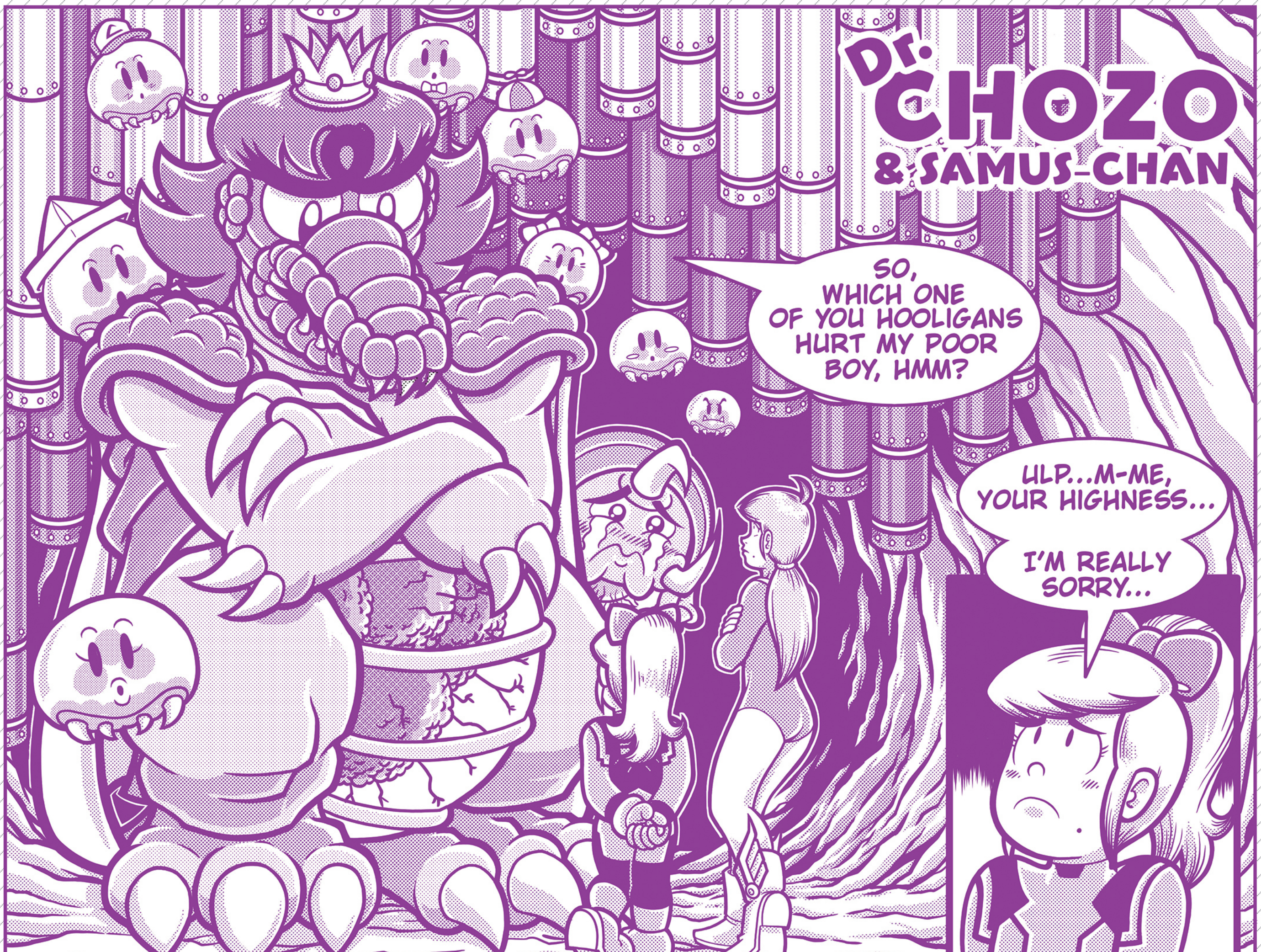
One thing I was surprised to learn was that the series' hallmark Weapons Triangle hadn't been implemented in this first game – it was added to the franchise with the first Super Famicom installment. You have to infer from clues given by helpful villagers and weapon names in order to deal heavy damage against certain foes – a Wyrmslayer sword is super effective against enemy Manaketes; keep Pegasus and Wyvern Knights away from archers; and beware of the Ridersbane if you're on a horse. Despite that, I didn't have much trouble with the boss battles once I cornered the enemy general in their fortress.

Fire Emblem's already in the Famicom collection on Nintendo Switch Online in its original version (along with two Special save states), so what makes this worth its $5.99 price tag – along with its English translation – are options to increase the speed (either the entire game or just through enemy turns) and two options for save states: the standard bookmark and a Turn Rewind function, both accessible in a special menu activated with the X Button.

Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon & the Blade of Light was easy for me to understand, hard to master, and I sincerely believe that it still holds up 30 years later. I also hope this release will open the doors for more classics that never crossed the ocean to get full English releases on Switch, and playing the original has definitely whetted my appetite for more. Whether you're a newbie like me or not, you won't regret experiencing this part of Fire Emblem *and* video gaming history. **– REBECCA**



SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO & INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS RATING: E



BY THOR THORVALDSON

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD + BOWSER'S FURY

Another encore from Nintendo's last generation *plus* fresh King Koopa content!

ON FEBRUARY 12, Mario fans from around the world will have a new opportunity to play one of the plumber protagonist's grandest adventures – many for the first time.

Super Mario 3D World was released on the Wii U all the way back in 2013, which is not only why many have yet to play it, but also why people have been awaiting a Switch release practically since the Switch was announced. Or, at the very least, since Nintendo kicked off the Wii U port bandwagon, as there were many games that could make a much bigger splash in their second chance at life.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO EAD TOKYO & 1-UP STUDIO RELEASE: FEBRUARY 12, 2021 RATING: E

While Super Mario 3D Land on the 3DS didn't do much to live up to the "Land" part of its name – aside from establishing a firm middle ground between the 3D and 2D styles of Mario game, it was largely pretty standard Mario stuff – World feels a bit more worthy of its title, as it takes what 3D Land did and blows it up big time.

Bowser is up to trouble as usual, but this time, he's causing havoc in a new land known as the Sprixie Kingdom. His latest scheme seems to take a page straight out of Dr. Eggman's book, as he creates a chaotic theme park in his own image that not only rivals the best efforts of Sonic's nemesis, but is filled with enough neon to make his old Dinosaur Land digs look like a flickering night-light.

Naturally, it's up to Mario and his friends to save the day by traveling through a variety of obstacle-filled and enemy-laden lands to reach the King of the Koopa. However, in a surprising twist, it's not Mario who leads the charge – it's Peach!

When Bowser appears from a mysterious clear pipe to bottle up the last Sprixie Princess for his plot, Princess Peach is the first one to go in after them, and is quickly followed by Mario, Luigi and Toad. As a result, this marked both Toad and Peach's debut in a 3D Mario platformer. While Toad had tagged along in New Super Mario Bros. Wii and NSMBU and Peach had adventures in 2007's Super Paper Mario and 2005's Super Princess Peach, this marked her first playable appearance in a mainline Mario game since Super Mario Bros. 2, all the way back in 1988!

It's only fitting, then, that Super Mario 3D World in some ways feels like a follow-up to that NES classic. While Wart and his 8 bits army aren't present, the Sprixie Princesses do resemble the captive Subcons from that game. Moreover, not only do players get to choose whether they would like to take on the Koopa Troop with Mario, Luigi, Toad or the Princess, but they each have their own distinct playstyle and traits as well.

As usual, Mario is the all-around guy who doesn't excel in any particular area, but nor is he lacking, either. Luigi brings the trademark high scuttling jumps and slippery traction, while Toad's lower leaps are balanced by his blazing speed. And Peach, of

course, is a little slower, but makes up for it by being able to float through the air after jumping. After you enter the bonus worlds, you can also add Rosalina into the mix, who can use the Super Mario Galaxy spin for attacking and aerial maneuvering.

Unlike Super Mario Bros. 2, though, you don't have to choose just one hero to get to see action. With three friends along for the ride, each of you can pick a different character and journey together! For those who grew up on this quartet's animated adventures in The Super Mario Bros. Super Show! and The Adventures of Super Mario Bros. 3, this was like a dream come true at long last. (Which made the return to the status quo in Super Mario Odyssey a bit of a bummer, but I digress.)

If there was one downside to multiplayer in Super Mario 3D World on Wii U, it's that it was local-only. Fortunately, that's being fixed here!

This Switch release finally allows players to team up with friends and family for local wireless and online play. This is ideal for the current state of things (though how well it works in practice through Nintendo Switch Online remains to be seen).

While our heroes will occasionally come across something to pick up and toss, most of the action is of the regular Mario variety, which means lots of block-bashing and baddie-stomping. To help along the way are plenty of power-ups, from the classic Super Mushroom, Fire Flower, Super Leaf and Super Star to the more recently familiar Mega Mushroom and Boomerang Flower, and a couple of new items as well.

The headliner is, naturally, the Super Bell that transforms our heroes into new Cat forms. As Cat Mario (or Luigi, etc.), you're able to swat at foes with your claws, pounce on enemies from afar and run straight up walls – or flagpoles! Then there are the Double Cherries, which can be paired with other power-ups to duplicate a character. Get more than one, and you can end up with a squad of five plumbers/princesses/pipsqueaks all being controlled by the same player!

Plus, Captain Toad is here to help in bonus stages that led to the creation of Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker.

There does remain a question of how well – or at least how much – of the Wii U experience will translate over. For starters, Miiverse is dead, so no more Miis with notes and cool art from fellow players will be found on the map screen. Like the Wii U version currently stands, you may still be able to collect stamps featuring cool art of the characters, but actually being able to do anything with them is another matter. Whether the sharing of ghost data for quick course completion will be implemented remains to be seen.

Then there's the touchscreen functionality. Some enemies and obstacles responded to touching them on the GamePad's touchscreen, and some courses even required it to play. It's possible these will remain intact on the Switch, but only be accessible if you're playing the game in Handheld Mode – Nintendo hasn't really said.

That isn't to say that the only changes being made are downgrades, however. Besides the addition of online play noted above, Nintendo is addressing a chief grievance against the original game: movement. The characters now appear to move faster, can climb higher and are no longer restricted to moving in only eight directions (originally to facilitate the Wii Remote's D-Pad in multiplayer). There's also gyro controls and amiibo support, too, with Cat Mario and Cat Peach amiibo figures being released alongside the game! What do they do? Who knows!? Nintendo has been keeping rather tight-lipped about this entire enterprise.

Speaking of being secretive, we've got a whole second half of this experience to speculate about! Nintendo has also not yet revealed the true nature of the "+ Bowser's Fury" part of this package's equation, so let's turn our attention to that next.

WELL-ROUNDED
MARIO

Though an all-around everyman, Mario is no average Joe! His skillset of well-seasoned heroism is defined by no striking weaknesses, but no stand-out strengths either. He's always a reliable choice to get you to each flagpole goal!

LEGGY LEAPER
LUIGI

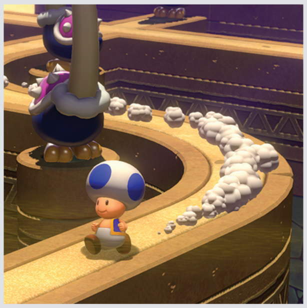
Though he began his career as a simple green-clothed clone of his big bro, Luigi has since stepped out of his sibling's shadow. Or, rather, leapt out! This taller twin can propel himself up to greater heights, kicking his legs all the while.

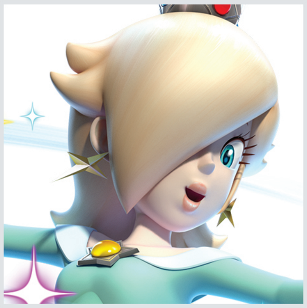
CRAFTILY HOVERING
PEACH

Luigi may be the winner for vertical reach, but if covering longer horizontal distances in mid-air is your most pressing need, you should select Princess Peach! She can hover across long gaps with grace, making platforming easier.

TOTALLY DASHING
TOAD

Short? Sure. Stubby? No doubt. But while the shrimpy size of this Mushroom Retainer shrinks his aerial abilities, he still retains his signature skill: speed! Toad can outrun anyone in a flat-out footrace. Less verticality, more velocity!



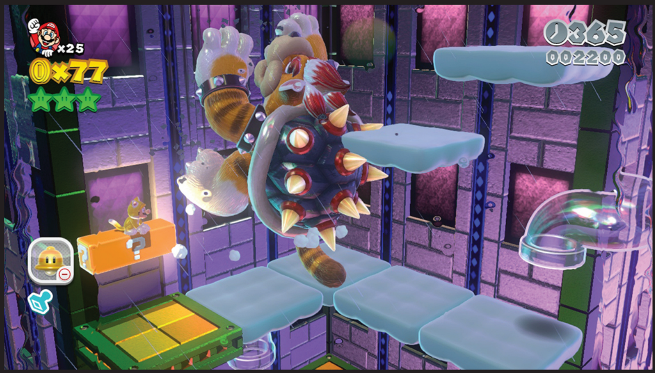


SPIN TO WIN
ROSALINA

Though not available to choose from the start (unless this new Switch version changes that), Rosalina can be unlocked after clearing the main game and playing the "Super Galaxy" level in Star World. She's got a spinning double jump!

NO JUMPS NEEDED
CAPTAIN TOAD

Finally, the leader of the Toad Brigade is back for an encore of his original playable appearance. Captain Toad is not available as a hero choice in the main game, but rather stars in his own side missions. And he can't jump! Eeek!



Let's begin with what we've been shown so far. It's not much!

When Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury was first unveiled during the Super Mario Bros. 35th Aniversary Nintendo Direct video presentation last September, its two-minute trailer spent the bulk of its runtime recapping the features and fun to be found in the main game. For Bowser's Fury, we only got about 20 seconds' worth of footage. And that was a seriously limited look!

That 20 seconds was dedicated to a single, slow, sweeping camera shot of one never-before-seen environment. It depicted a dark and stormy night raining cats and dogs down on top of a series of new structures – all of them cat-themed in some way. We saw arches topped with pointy cat ears, lighthouses similarly made feline and stone walls covered in cat carvings. Even the plant life played into the same theme: The trees in this area rise from the ground to end in two pointy tips instead of one (once again giving the impression of cat ears), and flowers on the ground seem to bloom in the shape of cats' paws. (If you've got a cat allergy, this is one part of the Mario world in which you'd feel terribly uncomfortable.)

The most striking setpiece placed in the center of this swirling storm, though, was the Super Bell-shaped sphinx seen to the right. Cat Mario is pondering its true nature, and since that brief 20-second camera shot ended with an extended focus on this particular part of the environment, we can probably safely surmise that it's a critically important centerpiece of the Bowser's Fury experience.

But . . . why all the cat stuff? This is supposed to be "Bowser's" Fury, right, and not "Feline Fury." Well, we're heading into some spoiler-ish territory now, so be warned before reading on!

. . . Still here? OK. Let's continue!

The Cat transformation is prevalent throughout the entirety of the main Super Mario 3D World campaign – it's the signature power-up of this Mario adventure, just like Raccoon Mario was the poster child of Super Mario Bros. 3 and the Cape defined Super Mario World. There are other power-ups in all of those games, but it's clear which one rises above the rest in each instance.

Also prevalent throughout Super Mario 3D World are Bowser boss battles. He appears to oppose the players on more than one occasion, riding in his big, beefy, purple-painted Koopa Chase muscle car and tossing soccer ball explosives at our heroes as he drives along. Each time, of course, he fails to defeat them – often since their Cat transformations make it easy to swat the soccer bombs back at him – and by the game's end, he's angry!

So he turns the tables on the do-gooders by using their own power against them! The final Bowser battle of the game has him kick his car to the curb and instead embrace his own Cat transformation, using his own Super Bell to become the mighty Meowser! That epic last battle against Bowser-as-a-cat also takes place in a torrential downpour – meaning the core Super Mario 3D World quest ends with exactly the same imagery the teaser shot of Bowser's Fury used to present itself: cats in the rain.

Now, with all that established, we can make our first prediction about what Bowser's Fury has planned for us! It seems like it could be an extension of the main 3D World game that picks up right after the conclusion of the battle with Meowser. Perhaps, rather than being defeated in this Switch version of the game, Bowser might pick himself up, dust himself off and retreat to this all-new stormy cat land, forcing Mario and the gang to have to give chase and complete even more challenges before bringing King Koopa to justice once again.

Let's turn our attention back to the sphinx for a moment. See how it's all dark and sad-looking, with spikes protuding from it all over? Very similar to the spikes popping out of the Bowser's Fury logo. (Flip back to the front cover for reference.) Meanwhile, the base of this statue remains golden. My guess is that Bowser has corrupted this sphinx statue with his dark magic in some way, and it's up to the heroes to restore it to its former luster!

Perhaps that's where the lighthouses come into play? There are several dotted around the cat-themed landscape, so it's not like it's just one placed there for ambience. Surely they serve a gameplay purpose, and we're meant to reach and climb each one.

Like the Sheikah towers in Breath of the Wild! Climbing each lighthouse could count as one step of completion, and maybe after ascending all of them their lights could shine, pierce the darkness of the storm and drive away the spiked corruption surrounding the sad sphinx's bell-shaped head.

Speaking of Breath of the Wild, its signature go-anywhere style of environment exploration might share a bit of DNA with Bowser's Fury as well. Super Mario 3D World is almost entirely linear in its levels. The game is 3D, true, but its level design structure is much more like 2D Mario games, in that each stage is set up with one main path to follow and a flagpole placed at the end to mark the goal you're trying to reach.

. . . But there's one exception! In the middle of World 5-4, Sprawling Savannah, there's a large open area that can be freely explored in all directions. It's limited in scope – it's basically just one big flat space with a few rabbits to chase and a line of Ant Troopers to inspect – but, back in 2013, it gave us a hint that Nintendo's developers might have had more in mind for this game during development.

Now the added power of the Switch might be allowing them to unlock more of their original ambition. Though, again, we've only had a glimpse of it, the stormy cat land seems to be set up like a large, freely explorable space, with small platforming challenge areas spread around in different locations surrounding the central sphinx. It's definitely not a Point A-to-Point B run from one starting point to a flagpole goal.

So, that's our second prediction: Bowser's Fury will offer gameplay that is more open and free-flowing than the core 3D World levels offer. It has to be something that's different to a degree significant enough to justify having "+ Bowser's Fury" separated out as its own piece of the overall name, you know? If it didn't do anything differently, then Nintendo would have stuck with our original bland prediction of calling this whole re-release "Super Mario 3D World Deluxe."

Other possibilities! These are much less likely, I think, but I want to entertain alternate ideas in case that teaser was an intentional misdirect.

I'd love to see Bowser be playable. He's become a protagonist in the past (we'll review those appearances a little later), but he's never come under player control in a main Mario game before. It'd be great if Bowser's Fury cast the Koopa King as the lead character and let us fight Mario from his *purr-spective*. (You know, as Meowser.)

It's also possible that Bowser's Fury is not a post-campaign experience – it could very well be standalone content that is selectable from the start screen within the first minute of firing up the game for the first time. In fact, it might be both! It might take place after the primary story, timeline-wise, but you might also still be able to jump straight to it from the start if you want to, just as Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition allowed players to hop right into the Future Connected epilogue without forcing them to replay the whole 60+ hours of the core story if they'd already done so on Wii or New Nintendo 3DS.

Other characters? Still a maybe in my mind, but it seems like there's a lot less of a chance for alternate allies like Daisy or Waluigi to appear now that we know Bowser's the focus of the newly added content. Though the Nintendo of 2021 is much more open to extending their games through DLC than the Nintendo of 2013 was, so it could be possible that extra character packs might be offered for a few dollars more at some point in the future.

Lastly, there's the question of the difficulty level of the Bowser's Fury content. Regardless of what form it takes, that name very much gives off the vibe that this isn't going to be a walk in the park. Nintendo has made some intentionally frustratingly tough Mario levels in the past – could this be the next set of stages that are only meant to be conquered by true Power Players? If so, that might explain why marketing has been so silent so far. They don't want to scare customers away!

Thus ends our predictions. We may not know exactly what'll be new, but we do know the most important thing: This long overdue game is finally coming to Switch! **– DAVID + LUCAS**

PERSONA 5 STRIKERS

After a year of silence, Atlus has finally confirmed a localization!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPERS: OMEGA FORCE & P-STUDIO RELEASE: FEBRUARY 23, 2021 RATING: M

THE PHANTOM THIEVES have been making their presence known every year since their debut in 2017's Persona 5. Since then, their adventures have expanded to an anime, a rhythm game and the recent Persona 5 Royal, which offered an extended version of the original story. And now, Persona fans rejoice, because 2021 will be no different!

In December, Atlus announced the release date for Persona 5 Strikers, the English version of Japan's Persona 5 Scramble: The Phantom Strikers, which launched in 2019. This Persona 5 spin-off combines Atlus' RPG storytelling with the hack-and-slash action of Koei Tecmo and Omega Force's Musou (or "Warriors") series of games.

Persona 5 Strikers will arrive on February 23 on Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4 and Steam, so let's dive into what this crossover is all about!

The game serves as a sequel to the original Persona 5 story. A few months have passed and protagonist Joker and his friends are preparing to spend summer vacation together. Those plans go awry when they discover a new distorted reality in the Metaverse and investigate the mystery as the Phantom Thieves.

(Though it may not be plausible for everyone, I recommend playing Persona 5 before taking on Strikers – even though it's only available on PlayStation 3 and 4. Strikers will likely spoil the story from the original game, and it brings in several gameplay mechanics from it, too.)

Persona 5 Strikers retains several features from the original game while also adding its own spin on things.

The beloved cast of Phantom Thieves returns, along with their unique Personas and abilities. Combat features a mix of turn-based elements from Persona 5 and the fast-paced action of the Musou series.

Striking a balance between the two will be necessary. Joker and the Thieves can easily cut through hordes of enemies, but you'll need to employ some of the returning turn-based features from Persona 5 to turn the tide against tougher enemies. These include elemental blasts, stronger physical attacks and healing magic tied to each character's Persona. The hybrid battle system allows you to pause and unleash these special abilities on enemies.

Players can also employ other returning tactics such as analysis – which allows you to find enemy weaknesses – and All-Out Attacks, where your team gangs up on a downed foe.

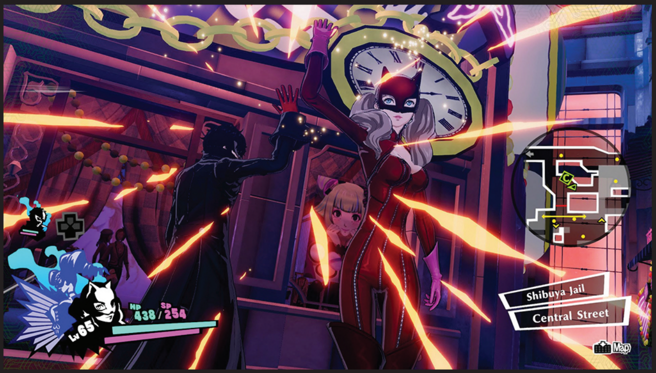
Persona 5 Strikers will also offer some intriguing new changes beyond combat. A new character, Sophia, joins the Phantom Thieves, wielding yo-yo weapons and offering a shop. Joker expands his culinary skills with a new cooking feature.

Instead of infiltrating Palaces, the Phantom Thieves explore Jails: locations in the Metaverse that look like distorted versions of Tokyo and other Japanese cities. These locales allow for a more vertical environment compared to the original game. In gameplay footage, we've seen Joker traversing a Jail by climbing buildings, jumping around rooftops and creeping through an underground waterway.

The Jails are ruled by Monarchs, and they gain power and influence by stealing people's desires, which changes their hearts and imprisons them. In Persona 5, the Phantom Thieves changed the hearts of twisted people whose desires had gotten out of control. It'll be interesting to face foes who exploit that same ability.

Strikers seems like it'll be a welcome addition to the Persona 5 universe, so get ready for another adventure with Joker and the crew!

– MAGGIE



THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS OF COLD STEEL IV

The Legend (or rather, just this part of it) comes to an end.

FEW VIDEO GAMES would benefit more from a speedily released sequel than Trails of Cold Steel III.

The Nihon Falcom JRPG weaves an over 100-hour tale with protagonist Rean Schwarzer and his allies encountering political intrigue and magical secrets. Then, it ends with a gut-wrenching cliffhanger.

Players won't have to wait too long to see what happens next, though, as NIS America is working to release its sequel, Trails of Cold Steel IV, about a year later for each platform. Trails of Cold Steel IV released for PlayStation 4 in October 2020, and its PC and Nintendo Switch versions are coming sometime in 2021.

I can't comment on how the game will perform on the Switch yet, but I've played about 15 hours of Trails of Cold Steel IV on the PS4 so far, so I can speak to how it's serving as a sequel in its first act. (After this point, I'll discuss some story spoilers for both III and IV, so here's your warning!)

Trails of Cold Steel III's ending sets up a bleak scenario for the fourth game: Rean gets captured and a prophetic curse is released across the Erebonian Empire that causes increased aggression in its people. This allows for Cold Steel IV to begin differently than the series' previous entries – you don't start the game playing as Rean.

Instead, players take on the roles of Juna Crawford, Kurt Vander and Altina Orion in the new Class VII, as well as heroes from previous Trails titles, including Estelle Bright from Trails in the Sky and Lloyd Bannings from the non-localized Crossbell duology: Zero no Kiseki and Ao no Kiseki.

These changes in perspective provide a refreshing start to Trails of Cold Steel IV. Playing as Estelle and Lloyd – who are Trails legends in their own right – is such a fun experience that had me fangirling. The game's first act also shows that it is extremely tough to go into this game without some prior knowledge of the Trails universe as a whole. (I recommend playing Trails of Cold Steel III at the very least if you're curious about delving into the series.)

The visuals, menus, locations and combat elements largely remain the same from Trails of Cold Steel III to IV, but Falcom includes enough new additions to keep things interesting.

Spirit Shrines and Trial Chests, previously seen in Trails of Cold Steel II, make a return. The Shrines are optional dungeons you can take on with rewards including rare Quartz, visions that give insight into the story and Trial Chests. These special chests require you to use specific combos of characters in a battle. If you succeed, those characters are strengthened, which comes in handy since combat is more difficult from III to IV. (For example, Brave Orders are less powerful and exploitable in Trails of Cold Steel IV, requiring players to consider different strategies.)

With these additions and its inevitable conclusion of Falcom's Erebonian arc, Trails of Cold Steel IV is set to give players a pensive and promising end to the journey. **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RELEASE: TBA 2021 RATING: T

BRAVELY DEFAULT II

Demo feedback has informed upgrades for the final release.

IT'S ALWAYS REFRESHING to see game developers take player feedback into account. In the case of Bravely Default II, the work the developers have put in to make the game just right is worthy of your attention.

Nintendo released a demo of Bravely Default II in March 2020 and received around 22,000 survey responses from players who tried it out. The feedback was mixed. While players loved the game's music and visuals, its tough combat difficulty and awkward controls garnered criticism.

The way the game's developers addressed the survey feedback should provide hope and excitement for the final product, though. In a video message from October, producer Masashi Takahashi detailed several changes to the game as a result of those player responses.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: TEAM ASANO & CLAYTECHWORKS RELEASE: FEBRUARY 26, 2021 RATING: E10+

For starters, the developers implemented a way for players to switch between three difficulty levels as they play: Casual, Normal and Hard. The boss battles will remain tough on each setting, allowing players to feel the weight of those fights. Early battles are now easier, so newcomers can dive in with less worry.

More changes to combat include the ability to skip battle intro scenes, an underdog bonus for defeating strong monsters with a party at lower levels and adding gauge bars to your characters in combat, making it easier to see their turn order.

Takahashi also mentioned tweaks to exploration, including an auto-run option in the menu, adjusting monster speed and adding visual cues that will help players identify monsters' strength level in the field.

Other quality-of-life improvements include making the game's text easier to read, cleaning up the job menu and overhauling controls mapped to the + and - buttons. All together, these changes show the care and concern that Bravely Default II's developers have for fans of the series, and it adds to the game's promising premise and gameplay systems.

Now, a quick refresher before the game's release.

Despite the "II" in its name, this game features a new cast and setting from its predecessors: 2012's Bravely Default and its direct sequel, 2016's Bravely Second: End Layer. New players should be able to jump into Bravely Default II without a ton of prior knowledge.

Players will take on the role of young sailor Seth and his companions: refugee princess Gloria, scholar Elvis and mercenary Adelle. These heroes find themselves united on a quest to make sure four elemental crystals don't fall into the wrong hands. Along the way, the four explore the five kingdoms of Excillant and cleave their way through turn-based battles.

In these battles, you'll have access to the Brave and Default commands, which offer their own risks and rewards. Brave allows you to spend Brave Points (BP) to unleash multiple attacks on an enemy; Default provides a defensive stance, where you guard and hold your turn in order to save up BP. Knowing when to use each is key.

Bravely Default II's Asterisk system adds another layer of choice to the combat. Several enemies in the game possess Asterisks: stones that allow characters to take on different jobs. Jobs offer characters stat boosts and special abilities. The more Asterisks you claim, the more skills you'll have at your disposal.

Some Asterisks include the Vanguard, who focuses on stalwart defense and shield attacks; the Bard, who uses music to buff allies and debuff enemies; and the Beastmaster, who can summon monsters or capture them in the field to be used in battle.

So, which sounds best to you? And do you plan on a more offensive or defensive strategy in battle? Consider your choices and make them wisely beginning on February 26! **— MAGGIE**

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

Capcom brings an exclusive new series installment to Switch!

I'VE BEEN WAITING for this moment . . . for all my life. (Oh Lord!) OK, well maybe since 2018's Monster Hunter: World was released, which wasn't that long ago. But we Nintendo Monster Hunter fans have been waiting a lot longer for a true, brand-new, not-a-spin-off, not-ultimate-edition Monster Hunter game to arrive. Enter Monster Hunter Rise!

After much ado and strong rumors that Capcom was working on a new Monster Hunter game that involved a Nintendo system (goodbye, 3DS, you served us all well), Capcom unveiled Monster Hunter Rise for Switch during a surprise Nintendo Direct Mini this past September. That was followed by a separate stream, which gifted Rise its own little Mini presentation. It was kind of a big deal for Capcom!

So here's the rundown. The "Rise" part of the moniker is derived from its vertical focus, as well as the spirit of the Japanese-inspired setting. Palicos will be augmented by the addition of the Palamute, a dog that accompanies the player during missions; and which can also be ridden as a mount. (Yes, you can pet it.) For some, the dog is enough to sell Rise on pureness alone. It's even on the box art and has its own amiibo!

Rise isn't just all about cuteness, though. It seems to build upon multiple positive additions to Monster Hunter: World, including an enhanced focus on locomotion (a grappling hook!) and the idea of presenting one giant map instead of a series of connected corridors and load sequences. Given the footage so far I'm surprised it's running on a regular Switch at all, but Capcom is very adamant that Rise is stable on existing hardware – not a secret "Switch Pro" behind the scenes. (Though that's exactly what an NDA-ed Capcom *would* say!)

That said, since Rise has been in development for four years, it's obvious that Capcom has had plenty of time to get acquainted with the Switch as we know it today. That's in part due to the existence of the RE Engine, which was described as a "challenge" to adapt by producer Ryozo Tsujimoto, and will target "a comfortable 30 frames per second." Other quality-of-life upgrades include the option to skip cutscenes. (That would have been great in World at launch.)

Rise will also focus on separate solo and multiplayer elements (which sport their own missions), which is interesting, to say the least. Sometimes it was tough to really focus on a story mission when matchmaking options popped up every so often, but the lack of player choice might be grating for some. We'll have to see how Capcom handles it down the line. So far, I have a good feeling about it, especially if there's a bigger narrative drive.

Oh, about those amiibo: There are three currently being sold right now: a Palico, a Palamute and the big, brutal Magnamalo monster. The former two go for $19.99 and the latter is $24.99, which is a trio of pricey meatballs! Oh, and they're only being sold at GameStop in the West. This deal is getting worse all the time!

Logistics for the optional amiibo aside, Monster Hunter Rise looks like a fun romp, and one I'll no doubt get absolutely addicted to with the ability to play it portably. I grew up jamming on Monster Hunter on the PSP and 3DS, so this shift back to Switch feels like the series is coming home. Look for it to arrive on March 26, unless something goes awry. **– CHRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
RELEASE: MARCH 26, 2021 RATING: T

STORY OF SEASONS: PIONEERS OF OLIVE TOWN

Farming in a forest?

2021 MARKS THE 25th anniversary of the Story of Seasons series – so what better way to celebrate than with an all-new game? Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town was a surprise announcement this past October, and it both honors the past (with a welcome return to the art style from the 3DS games) and moves the brand one more step into the future by doing something totally new: This sequel takes place in an untamed wilderness!

As always, you're the new farmer in town, this time invited back to your grandfather's homestead by his old friend, Victor, who is the mayor of nearby Olive Town. But the farm has been reclaimed by nature since Grandpa left, so you'll need to put in hard work to rebuild it – from chopping down trees and mining minerals to taming the feral livestock that were abandoned to wander in the forest. There are buildings and other structures to restore, and you'll also be able to lay out elaborate gardens complete with brick paths, flower beds and chicken topiaries. There are also new on-screen progress gauges for fishing and logging, and automatic sprinklers to make quick work of watering your crops.

The sleepy seaside village of Olive Town could also use your help – by fulfilling requests from your neighbors such as taking portraits of animals for the museum, you'll gradually turn it into a tourist destination. Of course, there are 10 potential singles to romance and start a family with as well! There's livestock expert Bridget, Ralph the forest ranger, Reina the museum guide, fishing fan Iori and many other interesting folks – including a group of little nature spirits, the Earth Sprites, who will help you unlock the secrets of the land.

Pioneers of Olive Town is set to bloom on the Switch in February in Japan, then in March in our neck of the woods! **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: MARVELOUS (XSEED)
RELEASE: MARCH 23, 2021 RATING: E10+

ATELIER RYZA 2: LOST LEGENDS & THE SECRET FAIRY

Ryza swings into an unprecedented second appearance!

AS A BUDDING alchemist, Reisalin "Ryza" Stout is all about forging new territory.

She began her journey in 2019's Atelier Ryza: Ever Darkness & the Secret Hideout, and her story will continue in Koei Tecmo and Gust's upcoming sequel Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy.

In this follow-up, three years have passed since Ryza and her friends embarked on their first adventure together. Ryza became a teacher to children at her home on Kurken Island, but seeks to expand her knowledge of alchemy. She'll travel to a new setting: the capital city of Ashra-am Baird. There, she'll reconnect with her friends Klaudia, Lent and Tao, as well as meet a mysterious creature called Fi.

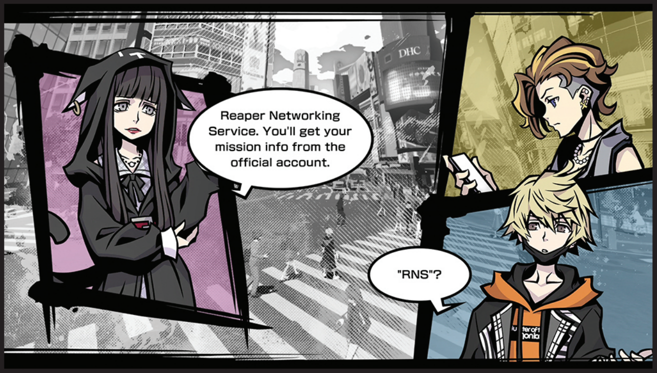
The long-running Atelier series focuses on finding resources and crafting items, which can be used to complete quests. The first Ryza added a hybrid real-time and turn-based combat system to the mix, and it will return in this sequel.

Atelier Ryza 2 enhances the exploration and crafting systems put in place in the first entry. On the exploration side of things, Ryza will traverse the city and the environments around it in new ways: Some options include swimming and climbing abilities, using grappling hooks and riding monsters. And crafting is upgraded with the new Essence feature, which can change the elemental nature of an ingredient, giving items new qualities.

Another new feature, Evolution Link, lets players combine two synthesized items together with the possibility of creating something unique and powerful.

Atelier Ryza 2 is the 22nd entry in the series, but marks the first time a protagonist has ever been brought back for a second time. The developers must really love Ryza in particular! **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KOEI TECMO
DEVELOPER: GUST
RELEASE: JANUARY 26, 2021 RATING: T



NEO: THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU

At long last, an all-new sequel!

2020 MAY NOT have been the best year of our lives, but it will go down in The World Ends With You fandom as the year our patience was finally rewarded. First, during what would have been Anime Expo 2020, there was the announcement of The World Ends With You: The Animation, which will be premiering this April. The development team has always wanted TWEWY to become an anime, and the fact it's finally happening is good news in and of itself. Then the *really* good news came at the end of November: It's been 13 years, but we're finally getting a true sequel, NEO: The World Ends With You, this summer!

2018's The World Ends With You: Final Remix was a great way to bring an HD version of the Nintendo DS classic to the Nintendo Switch, but it did have issues with its Joy-Con motion controls (I rated it a 6.5 in NF Issue #37). NEO's combat has gotten a complete redesign from the ground up to make the transition from the touch-screen to the big screen complete. Instead of tagging in your partner for attacks (or mashing buttons on your DS for them to attack on the upper screen, if you want to go old school), you'll be controlling a party of up to four characters and their Pin techs.

Shibuya's now a fully rendered 3D environment teeming with people, complete with side streets and little alleyways to duck into, and best of all, it's got the same visual style as the original. Even Tower Records (Towa Records in the original) looks almost the same as it does in real life!

The technology's also gotten an upgrade: The flip phones Neku and his friends used have now given way to modern smartphones, and they're all connected to the Reaper Networking Service, thanks to someone who appears to be wearing a Mr. Mew kigurumi.

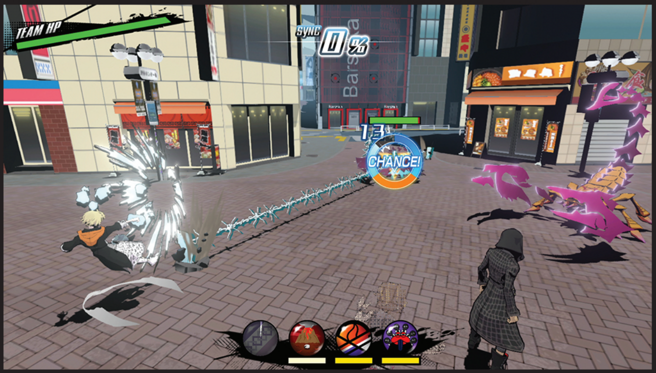
One thing that's not going to be changing are the tunes. Original composer Takeharu Ishimoto, who left Square Enix in 2017 to become a freelancer, will be returning for the sequel – and you can hear callbacks to some of his iconic tracks in the teaser trailer.

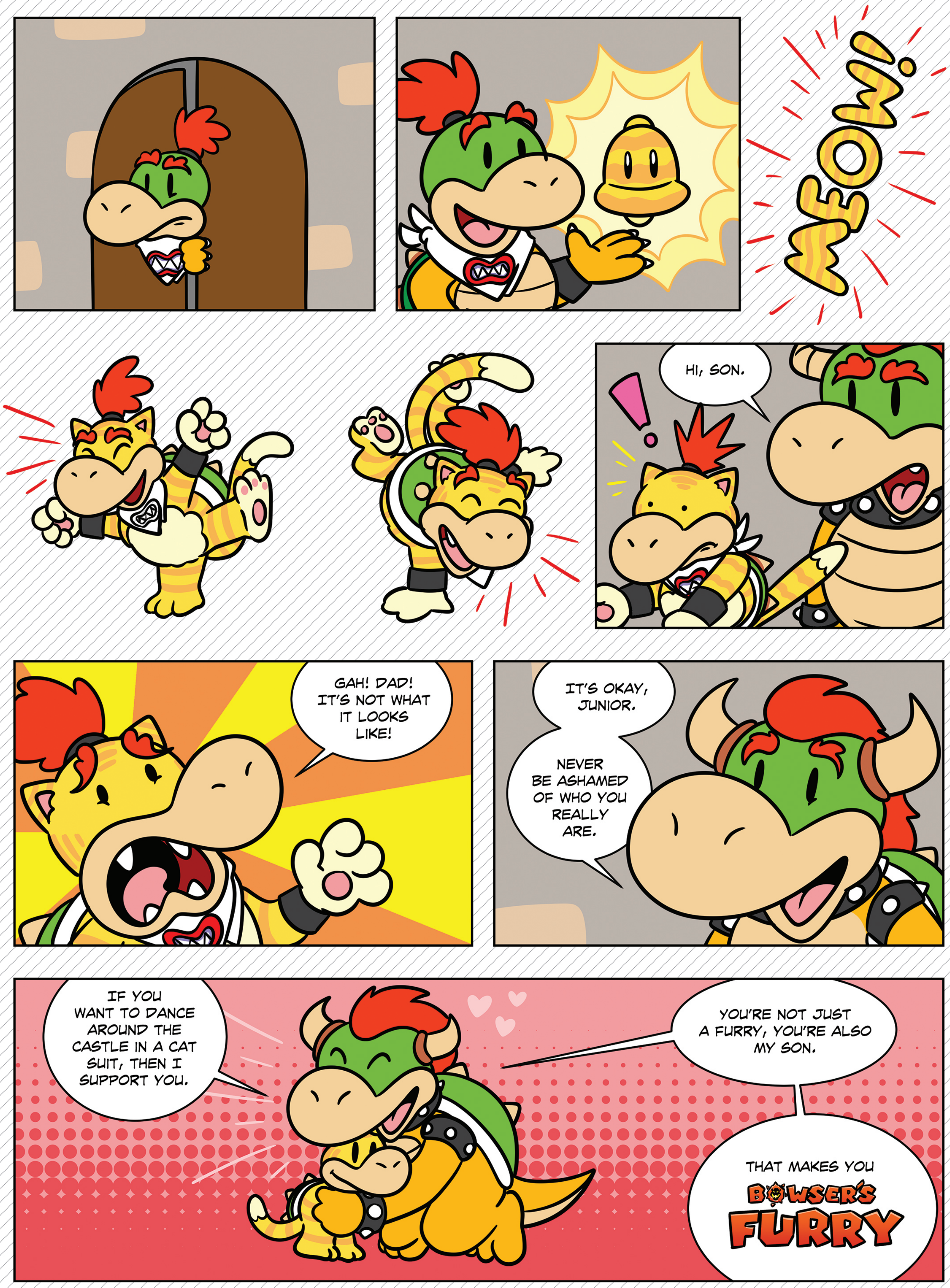
Our main group this time around features a trio of new faces and a somewhat surprising familiar figure. Rindo, a boy who's glued to his smartphone and is always wearing a black face mask, has been experiencing strange visions of the erasure of Shibuya. He is thrust into the Reaper's Game along with his schoolmate, the styling Fret, and the two of them encounter the bespectacled, outspoken college student Nagi. Rounding out the quartet is the mathematical Sho Minamimoto – a dangerous Reaper and one of the four Game Masters in the original, but seemingly Rindo's ally in the sequel.

He's not the only one returning – the Reaper Koki Kariya has returned as a main antagonist, and we finally have a name for the mysterious girl in the red plaid skirt that appeared in Final Remix's bonus chapter: Tsugumi Matsunae. What is her role in everything? And who is this mysterious new Game Master, Shiba?

NEO: The World Ends With You looks like it's set to offer everything fans have asked for over the past decade, and the double dose of that and the animation has me so zetta *hyped!* **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: SUMMER 2021 RATING: RP





BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

HIS REIGN HAS ENDURED FOR 35 YEARS . . .

LONG LIVE KING KOOPA

. . . BUT DO YOU TRULY KNOW THIS TERRIFYING TYRANT?

HE'S A KIDNAPPER

A SPRAWLING DOMAIN built upon blackened lands thought to be uninhabitable; an army of loyal soldiers who worship his every breath; a wellspring of malevolent magic with which to weave a tapestry of terror throughout time and space – King Bowser would appear to have everything a dastardly despot could ever hope for. Still, even the mightiest of monarchs needs a hobby to drive away the doldrums. And what more exhilarating amusement could there be than good old fashioned kidnapping!

Nearly every scheme cooked up in Castle Koopa involves capturing a high-profile target, and said target is often the hapless Princess Peach of the Mushroom Kingdom. How often, you may ask? Let's consult the record books, shall we?

Bowser features in dozens of Mario's adventures, sometimes as a villain, other times as a reluctant ally; in either instance, he tries to squeeze some princess abduction into his schedule. Typically he's successful, rarely he's thwarted before he can commit the deed and even more rarely another baddie beats him to the punch! By my calculations, if we focus solely on his successful Peach captures within game media and disregard all ports and remakes, we are left with a grand total of …

… pause for dramatic effect …

… 24! (Bumped up to 25 if you choose to include Hotel Mario within series canon.)

Certain kidnapping episodes are especially noteworthy: Consider Super Mario RPG, in which Peach is in Bowser's possession for less than five minutes before the Smithy Gang forcefully installs a new skylight in his roof. In Super Mario Sunshine, it's technically Bowser Jr. who absconds with the princess, but since he's acting upon Daddy's lie that Peach is his mother and that they ought to spend quality vacation time together, it still counts. As does that one time the brute used a Dark Cannon to transform Peach into a trophy in Super Smash Bros. Brawl's The Subspace Emissary. And I bet you forgot all about Puzzle & Dragons: Super Mario Bros. Edition and the original Game & Watch: Super Mario Bros., huh?

(Wait … Bowser actually captures *two* Peaches in Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam, doesn't he? So … 26?)

As impressive as his credentials are, how can our turtle tyrant expect to improve his kidnapping prowess if he sticks to the same princess-snatching routine? Thus, the Koopster sometimes challenges himself to pursue other prey, like the Sprixies in Super Mario 3D World and King Fret and Prince Pine in Yoshi's Safari. He even landed the trifecta of Mario, Luigi and Toad in Super Princess Peach, as if to send a message to would-be usurpers that not even his most formidable rivals can escape his scaly grasp!

Bowser has been king of the kidnapping game ever since he was an infant, and his reputation has only grown in the decades since. Is it an efficient use of his vast resources? Of course not! Just don't tell him that, or you might wind up in a Koopa cell yourself! **— TONY**

HE'S A KING

YOU PROBABLY JUST call him Bowser, but to his loyalists, he's "Daimaō Kuppa," a.k.a The Great Demon King Koopa! He has his own castle (castles?), he occasionally wears a crown and, most importantly, he has an army of loyal subjects at his disposal.

To start, take the humble Goomba. These walking fungi used to be a part of the Mushroom Kingdom, but have forsaken their homeworld in favor of following Bowser's rule. Their traitorous motives remain a mystery, but Goombas, Galoombas, Para-Goombas and more have pledged their loyalty to the would-be Mushroom Kingdom conqueror.

Bowser's army is far more vast than just treasonous fungus, though. He also has an arsenal of living weapons like Bullet Bills and Bob-ombs, an unnatural influence over plantlife in the form of various Piranha Plants and Pokeys, and even a command of the undead with countless Boos and Dry Bones serving as guardians in his many fortresses.

He's been known to boss around other villain's minions, too. Having previously served under Wart in Super Mario Bros. 2, Shy Guys, Snifits, Pidgits and even boss characters like Mouser and Triclyde seem to have forsaken the frog in favor of furthering Bowser's persistent plotting.

But more impressive is how he's managed to get other kings to serve him! On more than one occasion, Goomboss, King Bob-omb and King Boo have bent the metaphorical knee to Bowser to serve his devious designs.

Of course, the calamitous Koopa King wouldn't be where he is without his fellow turtle creatures who clearly view his superior size, strength and hairstyle as valid leadership qualifications. An endless supply of Koopa Troopas serve as the frontline soldiers in his army, while a staggering supply of siblings like Hammer Bros, Boomerang Bros, Sumo Bros and more are all ready and willing to sacrifice their safety in service of their Malevolent Monarch.

However, the highest ranks in the Koopa command do suggest a bit of nepotism, as the further up you go, the more you see a resemblance to the Royal Ruffian himself. Boom Boom and Pom Pom, the Koopalings and of course his favored child Bowser Jr. tend to be the generals in the Koopa Troop, and they all suspiciously share his more dragon-like physical characteristics like spiked shells and claws.

Perhaps his most trusted subjects, though, are the Magikoopas. In Yoshi's Island, Kamek served as Baby Bowser's caretaker — and since then, Koopa sorcerers regularly defend their king's domain and assist him in his plans for further domination, even in the face of great danger (and abuse from their master).

Whether it's in the Valley of Bowser, Dark Land, or that one time his castle was in real-world Antarctica, Bowser and his Koopa Troop are always ready to expand his nebulous empire, especially if it involves marrying into Mushroom Kingdom royalty. He may not be the most benevolent leader, but when it comes to Koopas, there's no doubt who's in charge! — **KRIS**

HE'S A... TURTLE?

A SHELL COVERED in spikes. Two horns poking out of his head. The ability to breathe fire, five separate spiked collars/armbands and a tail that completes the look with two final points of pain . . . just what *is* Bowser, exactly?

King Koopa's character design seems to be a wild fusion of a bull, a dragon, a dog (the spiked collar part) and a stegosaurus. But, ostensibly, he's meant to be a turtle! A truly terrifying and tyrannical terrapin.

When Shigeru Miyamoto was designing the characters for the first Super Mario Bros. game, he seemed to save the big bad boss for last. His original illustration of Bowser for the box art (the topmost image back on Page 39) ended up being really off-model compared to the final design. His fellow designers at Nintendo in the '80s thought he looked like a hippo with that greyish blue skin, and with his head horns not yet put into place. They suggested he take another pass at the Koopa King and bring him more in line with his Koopa Troopas — after all, the leader of a tribe of turtles should himself be as mean and imposing a turtle as possible.

Even still, if he's mostly meant to be a turtle, that aspect of his character is not played up very often. In the Smash series he ducks inside his shell to spin around, so there's that. But he's much more known for firebreathing, clawing and throwing his weight around! If he is a turtle, maybe he's just not a very good one? — **LUCAS**

HE'S A FATHER

"KING KOOPA" WAS the name Bowser always went by in the original Super Mario cartoon show, but when it came time to adapt the new Super Mario Bros. 3 into Saturday morning form in 1990, he was more commonly called "King Dad." That's because he suddenly found himself to be the sire of seven Koopa Kids! Larry, Morton, Wendy, Lemmy, Iggy, Roy and Ludwig had made their debut in the Super Mario Bros. 3 game, but solidified their status as Bowser's brood in toon form (where they were renamed as Cheatsy, Big Mouth, Kootie Pie, Hip, Hop, Bully and Kooky, respectively). They reappeared in Super Mario World to keep supporting their dastardly Dad . . . but then went on an extended hiatus.

The Mario series then revisited the characterization of King Koopa as a father figure with the introduction of Bowser Jr. in Super Mario Sunshine — which proved confusing for many. Was he an eighth kid, in addition to the previous seven? Where had they disappeared to? Even after their return, the questions have remained. Nintendo's current official stance is that Bowser Jr. is an only child, as the others have had their royal bloodline revoked via retcon (which older fans vehemently dispute!).

Regardless of origins or current ancestry, we can see that Bowser's parenting style is lax. He spoils his kid(s) with riches, power and land to rule over once his various strategies are underway. He obviously wants his most loyal underlings to emulate him — and they do — but the question is: why? Is it fear, love, lack of consequences for failure or something else?

The biggest peeks we've had into this world are the conversations in Sunshine and dialogue in the RPGs. In Sunshine, Bowser seems desperate to give his son a sense of belonging, saying Peach is his mother. While it's a false claim, it shows something is lacking at home, much like Peter Pan sought a mother in Wendy. In the RPGs, Bowser Jr. especially is always willing to say that his Dad is awesome, and because of how spoiled he is we can assume he gets what he wants when he wants it. It's hard to keep a spoiled kid happy, though. In Paper Mario: The Origami King, Mario joins Bowser Jr. in trying to get Bowser's Castle back, and in that quest we learn that there is a lot of love between father and son. Junior is stressed out about his Dad's predicament, and Bowser often brags about his son's conquests in the game. It's good, as Bowser essentially has no framework to be a loving father. He was king of Yoshi's Island when he was a toddler and had Kamek to raise him and also do his bidding — which could not have been easy for Kamek to navigate. In most games, we see Bowser Jr. trying to impress his Dad with mischievous antics rather than do Bowser's bidding with specific orders. This suggests either trust . . . or a complete lack of discipline. Considering Junior's demeanor, I'd say it's the latter.

One of my favorite moments is in the Switch Parental Controls intro video. Bowser is shown limiting Bowser Jr.'s play time, and playing with him, so it's not all instilling bad habits and throwing money around. Bowser could be a caring father — he just nurtures the wrong values! **— BRETT**

HE'S A MOVIE STAR

WHEN YOU'RE A superstar like Mario, it's no surprise when the media comes a-callin'. And when Mario has gone on to appear in movies, cartoons and comic books, it's only natural that he would bring his supporting cast along for the ride whenever possible, and that includes Bowser – though he might not always be quite as recognizable on-screen as his rival.

While Mario made the jump to cartoons in 1983 with Donkey Kong as a part of the Saturday Supercade on CBS, Bowser had to wait until 1986's Super Mario Bros.: Peach-hime Kyushutsu Dai Sakusen!, an original video animation adaptation of the first Super Mario Bros. game that gave him a little bit of a softer, more mischievous presence. There, he was voiced by Akiko Wada, who also provided the voice for Marge Simpson in the Japanese version of The Simpsons Movie.

That never officially made its way to the West, but we instead got The Super Mario Bros. Super Show! in 1989, bringing Bowser's hijinks to syndication. Or rather, King Koopa's, as the villain (voiced by the late Harvey Atkin) took on a different, much greener, more lizard-y appearance that only tangentially resembles the villain we all know and love. This portrayal continued on NBC in the years to follow, as he became "Bad King Dad" to a crop of Koopalings in The Adventures of Super Mario Bros. 3 and The New Super Mario World, their collective runs of new episodes ending in 1991.

That version also seemed to inspire King Koopa's Kool Kartoons, a live-action children's show broadcast only in southern California and hosted by an actor in a Koopa costume!

Also in 1989, another series of OVAs called the Amada Anime Series: Super Mario Bros. were released, based on a cross between classic fairy tales and the then-recently released Super Mario Bros. 3. In these, a more on-model Bowser (voiced by Masaharu Satō, who played the Japanese voice of King Cold in Dragon Ball Z) was cast as the villain in Mario-fied versions of Momotarō, Issun-bōshi ("The One-Inch Boy") and Snow White.

1993 marked Bowser's most notorious, most distinct non-game role to date, as he was portrayed by the late Dennis Hopper in Hollywood Pictures' Super Mario Bros. movie. No, he didn't simply provide a voice – he played President Koopa, a human-evolved tyrannosaur who rules the people of Saurasaland from atop his tower in the city of Dinohattan.

While Bowser usually had to take a role opposite Mario in most of these productions, there was one time he didn't have to deal with the stress of having his nemesis on the opposite side of the set. In Disney's 2012 hit Wreck-It Ralph, the Bowser we all know from the games got to put in a silver screen appearance in a non-speaking role as one of the members of Ralph's Bad-Anon group. Bet you didn't know he was friends with Zangief!

Even with a beefy Hollywood portfolio like this, Bowser's biggest role may still be to come, as it's expected he'll have a very large presence in Illumination's upcoming 2022 Super Mario Bros. animated movie. Any guesses for who will be cast to voice him in that one? **– DAVID**

HE'S (SOMETIMES) A HERO

THEY SAY THAT every villain is still the hero of their own story, and that's definitely true for Bowser. Regardless of if he's kidnapping Princess Peach, treating his loyal subjects like dirt or leading a group of real human children to a bizarre cultish gathering in King Koopa's Kool Kartoons, Bowser's gleeful confidence is contagious, even when he's committing acts of wanton mischief and mayhem. That's also because underneath all his spikes and fiery breath, Bowser actually isn't that excited to hurt anyone. His only goals are to find love and to be a good king – but because he's kind of a psychopath, he can't do either. From Bowser's perspective, Mario and Luigi are basically terrorists, stomping through his kingdom, destroying everything and everyone in their path, disrespecting his flag and eventually dunking him into his own lava pit! Who can blame him for his continued hostilities?

This Bowser's Eye View (BOV) of the Mario mythos has been explored a few times before, usually in RPGs like Super Mario RPG and Super Paper Mario where Bowser's a part-time playable pal. Even in these adventures, he never truly warms to "the good guys," but when the enemy of his enemy is his friend, he'll begrudgingly partner with the plucky upstarts who have busted into his castle and tossed him a beating countless times before. How forgiving!

Maybe after all these years of knowing Mario, Bowser has internalized a little of the power plumber's good side? In fact, that's exactly what happens in Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story, the first game in the Mario series that gave the lizard king a spot in the game's actual name. It's also the best-selling Mario RPG to date, expressing the underlying nature of all three lead characters in all-new ways.

It all starts off with Bowser being tricked into eating a mushroom that basically turns him into a giant vacuum cleaner. He can't help but suck up everything around him, including Mario, Luigi, Peach and much of the surrounding countryside – just as, deep down, he can't stop being a cold-blooded reptile who wants to take everyone and everything he desires by force. What makes this adventure different is that, from inside his body, Mario and Luigi help lead Bowser into battle against the true villains that fed him the vacuum mushroom in the first place. On one screen, the player controls Bowser directly, and on the other, the Mario brothers are pushing Bowser's buttons from the inside out to trigger various bodily functions.

While he never learns to be empathetic or selfless, Bowser ends up doing the right thing anyway, in part because he wants his kingdom back, and in part because it's what he's forced to do by the little heroes literally in his heart.

They say that the best way to change for the better is to "fake it until you make it," and we can only hope that these brief forays into following the heroes' path may someday start to stick for this scaly old grump.

– JONATHAN

HE'S NOT DONE!

SO, WHAT DOES the future hold in store for Nintendo's number one lizard king? Well, if the trajectory he's taken so far is any indication, there are going to be bigger and better things for our fiery monarch.

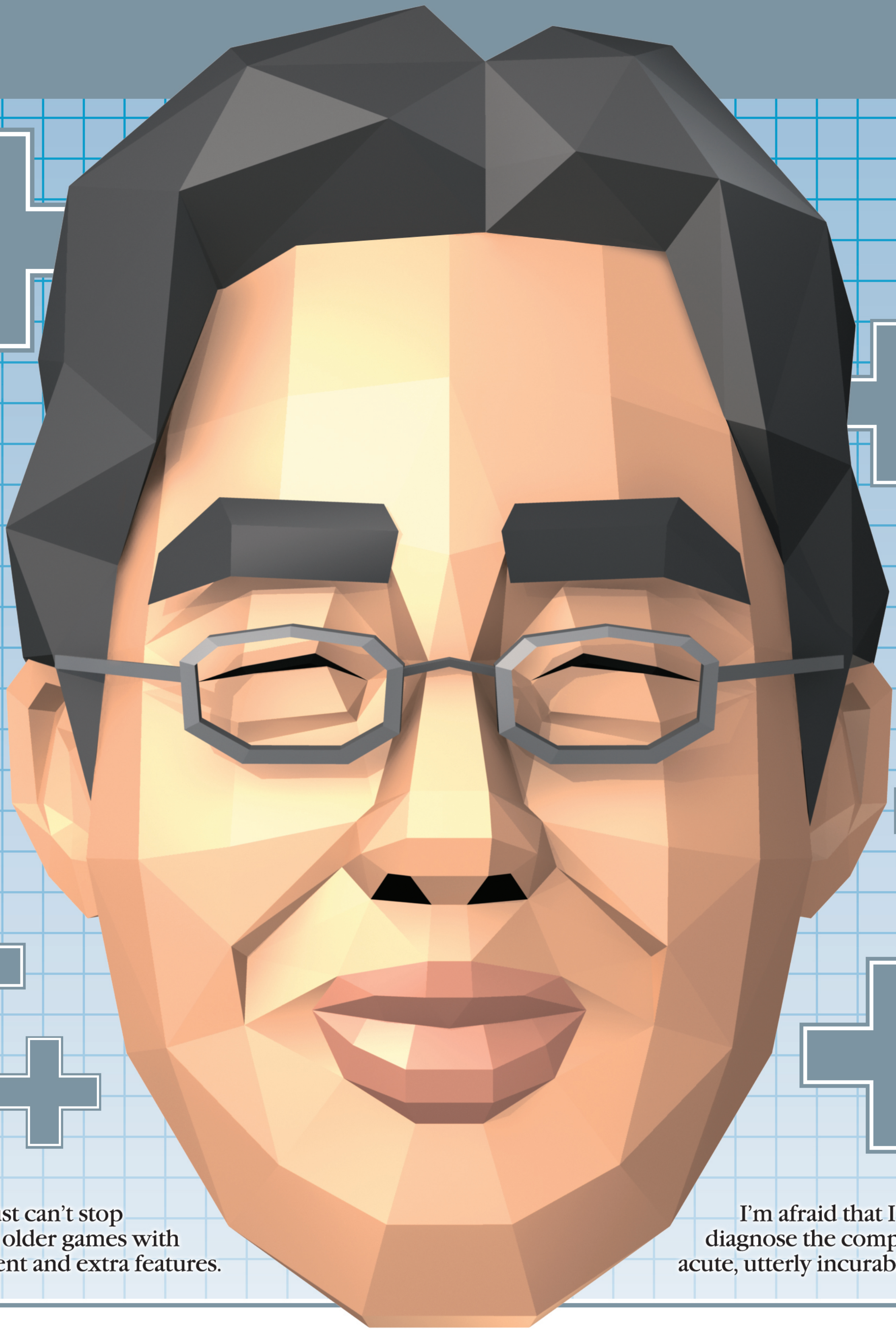
For starters, he was initially conceived to be gaming's Godzilla (complete with the ability to, apparently, reproduce all on his own!). So why is it that he's never gone head-to-head, kaiju-sized-toe-to-kaiju-sized-toe against Donkey Kong, Miyamoto's original leading man-monster? If Godzilla and King Kong can rumble in the movies, why can't Mario's two titanic arch enemies in games? It's almost inevitable that this marquee fight card would pull Pauline and Peach into the fray as well. Seeing the two heroines team up to take down both their respective kidnappers would no doubt be quite the crowd-pleaser.

It's also easy to imagine Bowser's role as a patriarch of the Koopa royal family expanding in the years to come. Though the Bowsette craze is more or less over, the character is still a fan favorite, recently making waves in Super Fighter M, a big-budget, highly illegal fan game for Android devices. In the face of these non-canon appearances, it's a safe bet that Nintendo is cooking up their own plans for a Queen Koopa – but how will that play out? Will she be a transformed version of Bowser as the fans have imagined? A separate entity to rival King Koopa? A Wario-style evil twin? Or maybe he'll finally find love after his failed wedding in Super Mario Odyssey, and actually tie the knot (with someone who isn't Peach)?

We're also on the cusp of the opening of the Super Nintendo World theme park, and the new Super Mario Bros. animated movie is coming soon too, both offering ample opportunities for the spiky-shelled sovereign to snag the spotlight. Seeing a life-sized Bowser at the amusement park and on the big screen will scare (and excite) kids and adults in a whole new way! Maybe this will up his profile and advance his potential for a starring role in his own series of short spin-off films? If Pixar can make an entire short movie about Burn-E (a little robot who appears in the hit film Wall-E for all of 30 seconds), then our favorite bad boy with burning breath should surely get his shot, right?

There's also the fact that Bowser is now 35 years old. That's not exactly ancient in human years, but for most video game characters and/or turtles, it's more than enough time to move toward your first mid-life crisis. Maybe instead of trying to steal people like Peach and the Sprixies, future Bowser will try to steal back his younger, cooler self, turn his hat around backwards and take up skateboarding to impress his fellow Koopa Kids? Better yet, maybe he'll lean all the way into his age and become a grandpa, just as the original Donkey Kong eventually settled into his Cranky persona?

One thing's for sure, Bowser's next phases in life will surely wow us in ways we never could have guessed. Whatever he becomes next, it's sure to be entertaining! And so, our loyalty wil remain unwavering. Viva La Koopa, long may he reign! **– JONATHAN**



Nintendo just can't stop re-releasing older games with added content and extra features.

I'm afraid that I'm forced to diagnose the company with an acute, utterly incurable case of . . .

+ ADDITION ADDICTION +

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

NINTENDOGS + CATS

Can you believe it's been 10 years now since we last got a sequel in this series? Nintendogs was *the* break-out hit of the DS generation, selling nearly 24,000,000 copies over the course of that generation – only New Super Mario Bros. sold more, giving these virtual pups the silver medal overall, but the gold for brand-new IPs. So, when the next handheld hardware came around, Nintendo was ready on Day 1 with a sequel that added even more.

Nintendogs + Cats explained itself entirely within its name. "This is the pet sim you loved on the DS, but now you can also care for virtual kitties too!" Overall sales ended up being just a fraction of the first game, though: around 4,000,000. That precipitous fall-off in popularity may have had more to do with how unpopular the 3DS itself was when it first launched, though. So bring this series back, Big N!

+ MARCH 2011 +

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME 3D

The Nintendogs sequel was the big-ticket item of the 3DS launch, as its limited Day 1 fellows, Pilotwings Resort and Steel Diver, just weren't system sellers. Much of the first few months of 3DS ownership was spent, then, waiting for this relaunch arrive! The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D promised to revive the epic N64 masterpiece in portable form – which would have been enough of a draw for many – but then it went further by adding stereoscopic depth to the land of Hyrule, as well as updating the environments and characters of the kingdom with fresh 3D models that weren't as rudimentary as the technology of 1998 had previously allowed. Nintendo had done re-releases before, but this one kicked off the line of "3D" and "HD" encore editions that used newer, better visuals as their primary appeal to encourage players to purchase.

+ JUNE 2011 +

CROSSWORDS PLUS

Other than digital dogs, the DS era of Nintendo history was defined by reaching out to people who didn't traditionally play video games. Titles like Brain Age, Art Academy, Clubhouse Games and Cooking Guide: Can't Decide What to Eat? (yes, that was real) drew attention from more casual gamers. And there's no game more casual than filling in a crossword puzzle!

The staple pastime of newspaper-reading grown-ups came to the DS as Crosswords DS. Then, when it came time for its sequel, Nintendo simply went with the name Crosswords Plus! What was the plus? More crosswords, of course! Over 1,000 puzzles were promised in this package. Anyone who grabbed a copy at its launch eight years ago and has done a puzzle a week since then still isn't even halfway through the entire set. That's a whole lot of content in a single cartridge!

+ OCTOBER 2012 +

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER HD

Having seen success in revisiting an epic Legend of Zelda adventure to kick off the company's 3D re-releases, Nintendo went to the same well when it came time to embrace the industry's HD re-release trend. Though fans bemoaned the toon style of The Wind Waker before its original release on the GameCube, public opinion ultimately came around and players embraced it overall – and that art style ended up being perfectly suited to getting this high-definition upgrade on Wii U two hardware generations later. Now we're hoping to see this one again on Switch!

+ OCTOBER 2013 +

KIRBY FIGHTERS DELUXE

I chose to only turn back the clock by one decade in selecting the games to include in this feature, as I'm hoping to illustrate to all of you that the last 10 years in particular have seen Nintendo adopt additional content in relaunches aggressively. So this isn't the first time the company used the "Deluxe" name to clue in prospective customers to the fact that the game they're thinking about buying is a newer, more complete version than has ever been available before. But Kirby Fighters Deluxe – as well as Dedede's Drum Dash Deluxe, which launched the same day – deserve special recognition, as both were merely minigames in their first appearance. Nintendo revisited them and added so much more to their designs that they then felt confident releasing them as individual, standalone software!

+ AUGUST 2014 +

NES REMIX PACK

For this entry, I've selected Japan's box art to be placed above, because it was only in Japan where a plus sign was used in the name of this game. There, it was "Famicom Remix 1 + 2". That's a little more straightforward than the name we in the West ended up with, as "Pack" kind of suggests you're getting more than just two games. Not the case! Though I suppose the biggest addition Nintendo gave these games was the physicality of the release itself. In this era before the rise of Limited Run Games, Nintendo gave us an early glimpse at their M.O. by giving the NES Remix titles this on-disc release.

+ DECEMBER 2014 +

PUZZLE & DRAGONS Z + PUZZLE & DRAGONS: SUPER MARIO BROS. EDITION

A most powerful plus indeed! In this case, it wasn't used to denote extra content being added to increase the value of a game. Rather, it meant an entire second game was being sold as a part of the same package!

Puzzle & Dragons started out as a massively successful mobile game in Japan in 2012. It was a phenomenon, earning so much revenue that it became, at one time, the most successful mobile game on Earth! It never caught on with nearly as much fervor in the States, though, so when it came time to bring its 3DS port to Western audiences, Nintendo of America decided to add some proven star power. Puzzle & Dragons: Super Mario Bros. Edition, which had been sold separately in Japan, was instead used to sweeten the pot of Puzzle & Dragons Z. Did it work? Well, we never did get another sequel.

+ MAY 2015 +

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS HD

Here's where the additions really get interesting! In the same way that The Wind Waker had been modernized with high-definition visuals, so too did Twilight Princess get a resolution bump on its way to Wii U. But between those two HD redos, the amiibo product line had been launched and brought Nintendo its most customer-energizing success of the era. So this package offered another extra: a packed-in amiibo, sold right in the same box as the software! It was like finding a prize at the bottom of your cereal box!

+ MARCH 2016 +

HYRULE WARRIORS LEGENDS

Sticking with the Legend of Zelda brand for another bit here, we make our way into the era when Nintendo was fully aware that the Wii U was never going to find any traction, and so they pilfered a few of its games to shore up the software lineup of the system that actually was a success: the 3DS. It was odd to see the Big N downgrade HD games to the smaller, less powerful system – but to combat that negative comparison, they made sure to add in extra content, of course!

Hyrule Warriors Legends expanded on the Zelda franchise self-crossover by adding new characters like the cast of The Wind Waker, as well as Linkle, a wholly original new character who was first dreamt up as a "female Link." Another big plus? A key gameplay revision that let you switch between different heroes in the middle of a battle. That was new here!

+ MARCH 2016 +

RHYTHM HEAVEN MEGAMIX

Here's another entry that I'm bending the rules a bit to include, as I once again wanted to showcase the Japanese box art instead of the American version.

1) Because in Japan, the name of this game was Rhythm Heaven: The Best Plus, once again putting "Plus" right in the title.

And 2) Because I can't show you the American box here. Because there was no American box! This celebration of the entire Rhythm Heaven saga was sadly disrespected by being sent only to the eShop in the States. What a missed opportunity to build this brand up in the West!

Megamix included content from all the series' prior games (Rhythm Tengoku on GBA + Rhythm Heaven on DS + Rhythm Heaven Fever on Wii) *plus* it added even more new bop-to-the-beat challenges beyond that. Hopefully Nintendo will keep the beat going in the future!

+ JUNE 2016 +

POOCHY & YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD

Here's a truly unique case to consider: I believe this may be the only video game in Nintendo history to have its leading character get bumped down to second-fiddle status in its second appearance. That's because Poochy charged in and claimed top billing in Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World!

It's still odd to me. How weird would "Waddle Dee & Kirby's Adventure" be? Or "Waluigi in Wario Land: Shake It!"? (No, nevermind, that would be awesome.)

I think what must have happened is that Nintendo's top executives must have been so smitten by the cuteness of the new Poochy amiibo that they shoved Yoshi aside and out of the spotlight of his own game in order to place the pup front and center. And who can blame them?

+ FEBRUARY 2017 +

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

OK, OK, *now* we're getting into the territory you knew we'd end up reaching: the era of the Wii U-to-Switch ports. An era we're still living in, now nearly four years into the life cycle of the Switch! Nintendo has skillfully mined the Wii U back catalog at a measured pace to fill out the Switch's release schedule, and it all began with this Deluxe release of Mario Kart 8 that added all-new characters and courses.

+ APRIL 2017 +

MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOM BATTLE

Another deviation from the core purpose of this piece, but I couldn't pass by this plus! Ubisoft was entrusted with the task of bringing Mario and his pals into a genre they'd never touched before (turn-based strategy) as well as introducing their wily Rabbids to the Mushroom Kingdom. While many had doubts at first, the combination of Mario + Rabbids proved to be a winning one. (Now, can we get a sequel please?)

+ AUGUST 2017 +

POKKÉN TOURNAMENT DX

Back to business, as here's a second example of a Wii U game getting a quick encore edition on the Switch, and with just a stylistic choice to truncate the word "Deluxe" down to only "DX." As a fighting game, Pokkén took the predictable path to adding extra value in its second home console appearance and simply offered a few more playable characters than before – like my personal favorite, Decidueye!

+ SEPTEMBER 2017 +

MARIO & LUIGI: SUPERSTAR SAGA + BOWSER'S MINIONS

Here at the halfway point through our run down memory lane, we reach what I'd argue is one of the most promising and prominent plus signs in this saga. Here, the fan-favorite first game in the Mario & Luigi RPG series was given a total visual overhaul for an encore appearance on the 3DS. That was enticing already, but not quite enough to get fans to open their wallets since the original GBA version was still available and held up perfectly well. So the developers at AlphaDream dreamt up a whole secondary story to append to the Mario Bros' adventure, complete with a fresh style of battle gameplay that had players commanding Bowser's hordes of troops. Did it work? Not exactly. But it was certainly an ambitious idea and more than past re-releases had done.

+ OCTOBER 2017 +

SNIPPERCLIPS PLUS: CUT IT OUT, TOGETHER!

Like NES Remix Pack before it, this retail release of Snipperclips came only after the game had made its first appearance in the eShop. The two-player puzzler was a Day 1 sensation on the brand-new Switch, making a major impact in that brief era in which there wasn't a lot of digital-only software to choose from quite yet. When it landed on store shelves, it included new worlds, new activities and remixed takes on its previous challenges.

+ NOVEMBER 2017 +

POKÉMON ULTRA SUN & ULTRA MOON

We wrapped up our review of the two-part Sword & Shield Expansion Pass DLC earlier in this issue, and it likely represents The Pokémon Company moving on from the practice of rehashing their mainline titles with added content and relaunching them as separately named retail games. But that was the strategy for two decades or so beforehand: Pokémon Yellow was just Red & Blue with extra content; Crystal did the same for Gold & Silver . . . all the way up to the launch of Ultra Sun & Ultra Moon just one year after the "normal" Sun & Moon games on 3DS. This pair of games presented the same Alola region and nearly the same set of monsters to catch, but with a handful of new Ultra Beasts to encounter and a remixed story to experience.

+ NOVEMBER 2017 +

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY: TROPICAL FREEZE

This is it! The winner! Really the entire purpose for this article: highlighting the grandeur of "New Funky Mode!" They didn't even bother changing the name of Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze when it swung from Wii U to Switch. They just added Funky Kong as a fresh playable character, slapped him riding a surfboard up on the corner of the box art and called it a day. It's hilarious. It's meme-worthy. And it worked, because Funky was fun!

+ MAY 2018 +

CAPTAIN TOAD: TREASURE TRACKER

The timeline's getting twisted now, since this Super Mario 3D World spin-off got its Switch port two and a half years ago . . . and now Captain Toad's playable debut is just now making the jump! This was just one of two ports released simultaneously, as Treasure Tracker also came to the 3DS, and both versions added in new courses based on Super Mario Odyssey – as advertised by a label added to each box.

+ JULY 2018 +

THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU: FINAL REMIX

With a brand-new sequel finally revealed, Final Remix will likely be getting a lot of second looks soon. This Switch port was not the first re-release for this adventure, as its DS source material was adapted for a mobile version in the interim. The name given to this edition, with updated HD visuals and controls, implies it will never be revisited again – but then, when has the word "Final" ever really held its true meaning when it comes to Square Enix?

+ OCTOBER 2018 +

SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE

"Everyone is Here!" That was Nintendo's message when bringing the Smash series to Switch: Every past fighter was coming back. Plus more! Sakurai added more and more characters and stages to the base game, creating what honestly is the ultimate crossover fighter. And he's still going! DLC has extended the additions for over two years now, and we've got at least three more characters still to come!

+ DECEMBER 2018 +

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. U DELUXE

"Deluxe" is back, and looking especially odd when appended to this already overly long game name. Mario Bros. begat Super Mario Bros. which begat New Super Mario Bros. which begat New Super Mario Bros. U – I honestly wouldn't be surprised if this game gets another re-release in the future that elongates the name further! The novel addition of playable Toadette/ Peachette made up for the oddness.

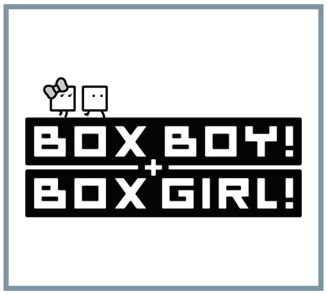
+ JANUARY 2019 +

KIRBY'S EXTRA EPIC YARN

For this 3DS swan song, Good-Feel turned the clock back to before Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World, then before the original Yoshi's Woolly World to revisit its predecessor back on the Wii. Kirby's Epic Yarn was a visual stunner on TVs, even running on a non-HD home console. Given that graphics were its original point of appeal, bringing it to the tiny 240p 3DS display was not ideal.

To make up for the downgrade, Kirby brought along Extra content, including a new Devilish Mode that introduced some actual tension to what was a laid-back romp before, as well as minigames led by King Dedede and Meta Knight. Really, that's HAL's Kirby game bonus mode strategy: Bring in Meta Knight and Dedede to do something on the side, and the fans will eat it up every time.

+ MARCH 2019 +



BOXBOY! + BOXGIRL!

Since the original game in this minimalist puzzler series was just called BOXBOY!, this release being named BOXBOY! + BOXGIRL! could have indicated a relaunch of that franchise starting point with the addition of a second playable character. And honestly, that would have been fine – especially if co-op remained a part of the proposition. But this game turned out to be much more than that, as it actually turned out to be a fourth full installment in the saga that focused on the teamwork of Qbby (the box-shaped boy) and Qucy (the box-shaped girl).

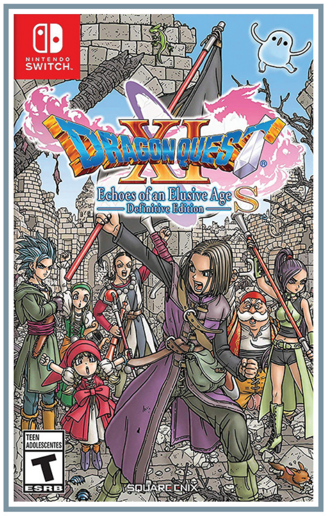
This is a brand that would be perfectly suited for a few "Deluxe" re-releases right about now, really, since its first three games are languishing in the 3DS eShop. HAL just ported Part Time UFO to Switch, so maybe there's a chance?

+ APRIL 2019 +

SUPER MARIO MAKER 2

Initially, fans predicted and even hoped for another straightforward Wii U port in the case of Super Mario Maker – but so much cool new construction content was added for this follow-up that it had to be billed as a full sequel! More enemies and level themes were joined by slopes (!) and an all-new 3D World-inspired building mode . . . which might get more attention now that 3D World is hitting Switch itself!

+ JUNE 2019 +



DRAGON QUEST XI S: ECHOES OF AN ELUSIVE AGE - DEFINITIVE EDITION

I gave New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe a hard time for having a long name, but it's nothing compared to this! Square Enix made Nintendo fans in the West wait for this one, but our patience was repaid by all the extra stuff crammed into this "Definitive Edition," like new side stories, being able to play entirely in 2D and, critically, full orchestration for the music. PS4 got it first, but had to deal with MIDIs!

+ SEPTEMBER 2019 +

TOKYO MIRAGE SESSIONS #FE ENCORE

We did our best to boost awareness of this re-release with front cover placement a year ago, as this wild fusion of ideas from both the Fire Emblem and Shin Megami Tensei brands absolutely deserved an encore. The pluses in this package were new dungeons, new stories, new allies taking part in battle and even a new cameo by everyone's favorite Phantom Thief, Joker. (Or his outfit, at least.)

+ JANUARY 2020 +

POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: RESCUE TEAM DX

With the Wii U well finally running dry for Nintendo, the company is beginning to have to reach back further in time to find content to re-release or remake for their newest console. Rescue Team DX turned back the clock by 15 years, pulling a pair of adventures that first appeared on the DS and GBA into modern day with a fused remaster. Oddly, not many Pokémon were added in the transition – mostly just Mega Evolved forms.

+ MARCH 2020 +

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES: DEFINITIVE EDITION

Another use of the "Definitive Edition" name, but I wonder if that choice sold this release a little short. The first Xenoblade quest is better than it's ever been, no doubt, but my favorite new piece of content was Xenoblade Chronicles: Future Connected, an epic epilogue that almost could have been sold as its own standalone product. Did Nintendo miss the mark by not promoting that part more heavily, directly on the box art?

+ MAY 2020 +

SUPER MARIO 3D ALL-STARS

Though there were many more games to choose from, hopefully this set of 30 has done the trick to convince you that the Big N is big on adding new content to re-released titles . . . which is why it's so frustrating when they fail to do just that! They set the expectation themselves, so we'll unhappily grumble about bare-bones reissues like Super Mario 3D All-Stars. We're addicted to additions now too!

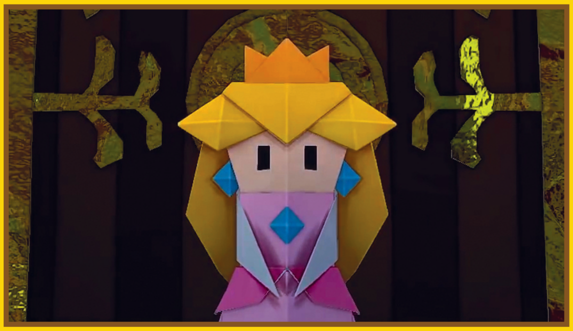
+ SEPTEMBER 2020 +

THE NINTENDO FORCE GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2020

As is our solemn annual duty, the members of the Nintendo Force have debated the merits of each new release from an entire calendar year, pit them all against one another and declared victors in a variety of individual categories of design. Now, look upon our selections and render your own judgment of either agreement with our choices or frustrated, head-shaking objection! Did we get it right? Wrong? A bit of both? It's up to you to decide!

BEST GRAPHICS
PAPER MARIO: THE ORIGAMI KING

While the debate about its gameplay continues, there's no arguing the fact that the latest Paper Mario is visually stunning. Just think about all the effort that went into creating the "Folded" characters – each one was meticulously designed with actual, traditional origami techniques before being put into the game!



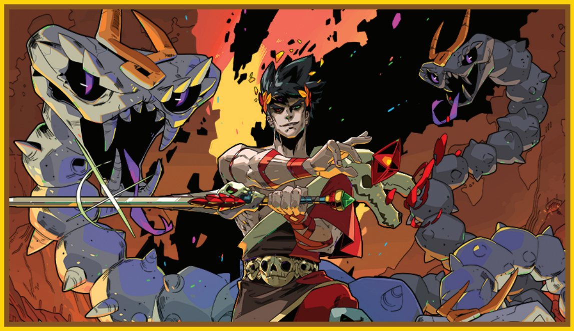
BEST MUSIC
VITAMIN CONNECTION

WayForward went wild with the soundtrack to this ambitiously original medical adventure, crafting a slate of hyperactive pop songs that keep your blood flowing as your characters are cruising through capillaries. Limited Run Games loved the OST so much they pressed it to CD! You can also listen via Bandcamp!

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

BEST CHALLENGE
HADES

Supergiant's latest epic came on strong toward the end of 2020, gaining praise from millions and even earning a Game of the Year nomination at The Game Awards. One big reason why it's clicked with so many is its "Heat" system, which lets players increase the level of difficulty in order to truly test their skills!



BEST THEME & FUN
WHAT THE GOLF?

The goofiest, golfiest game concept to hit the Switch in 2020 has got to be this absurd spin on one of the world's oldest and normally most strait-laced sports. What would happen if you played golf without golf balls? What if you flung cars and horses and ragdolling men around the course instead? Hilarity, that's what!

BEST MULTIPLAYER
CLUBHOUSE GAMES: 51 WORLDWIDE CLASSICS

In a year in which family quality time was forcibly replaced by family quantity time, having over four dozen classic board and card game diversions for parents and siblings to all play together has been a blessing. And no cardboard boxes to keep up with!

BEST PLAY CONTROL
SUPER MEGA BASEBALL 3

Global events may have wrecked the normalcy of America's pastime in 2020, but Metalhead Software stepped up to the plate with the best pinch hitter possible. Playing this third Super Mega installment felt perfect, as it recaptured the magic of the greatest old-school sims and managed to still feel modern as well!

BIGGEST SURPRISE
THE FIRST FIRE EMBLEM FINALLY LOCALIZED 30 YEARS LATER

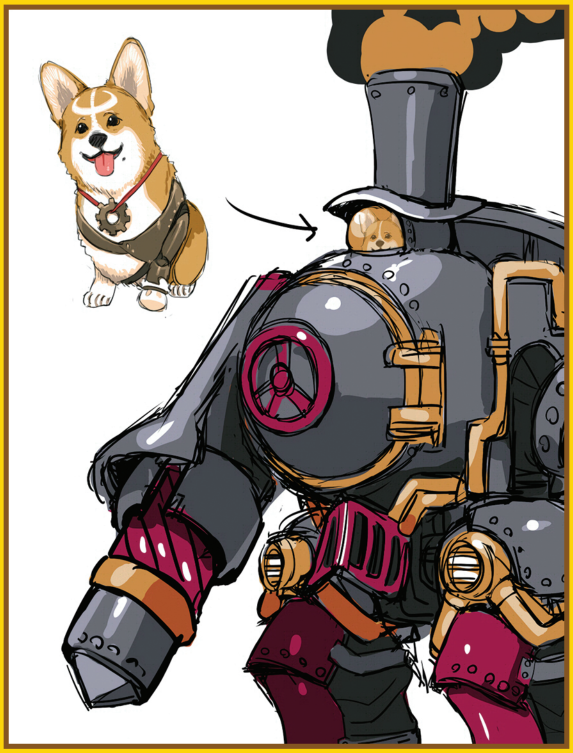
We've seen a few decades-late releases in recent years, like EarthBound Beginnings and Star Fox 2. But going all the way back to 1990 to right the wrong of not translating the first Fire Emblem, and then going all-out with physical extras too? Entirely unpredictable!

BEST REMASTER
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES: DEFINITIVE EDITION

Nintendo's addiction to additions led them to this incredible celebration of a Wii masterpiece. Not only was the game visually enhanced on Switch, but it got an all-new, epic epilogue that restored a massive area originally cut from the initial release! A perfect redux.

BEST NEW CHARACTER
HACHI, FROM BLOODSTAINED: CURSE OF THE MOON 2

It's no secret that Inti Creates' Bloodstained brand was forged to give a non-Konami development team the chance to play around in the Castlevania sandbox – you could swap the logos on this series and rename its heroes as Belmonts and no one would be the wiser. That is . . . until this little pupper came along! Granted, Castlevania games have embraced humor more than a time or two themselves, but they've never subverted the expectations of their gothic vampire horror setting as much as the Inti team did when they drew up Hachi. He's a Corgi. He's a mech pilot. He is full-on just a cute little dog who somehow knows how to pilot a hulking metal montrosity powered by steampunk swag, and he's a fully playable character, placed in the main cast right alongside three entirely "normal" 'Vania-esque allies and nobody bats an eye at how wildly absurd it is. Hachi is a *good doggo*. And we hope he rides again!



BEST INNOVATION
MARIO KART LIVE: HOME CIRCUIT

Time for an all-new award category! Over four decades into their history in the video game industry, Nintendo's developers continue to raise the bar (that they themselves set) for thinking outside of the box. But we previously haven't had a great award to give away to specifically honor bold, new, never-before-seen gameplay ideas. So, Best Innovation is here! Inaugurating this award is easy to do, as we've just recently witnessed an incredible fusion of classic kart racing gameplay, augmented reality technology and traditional remote-control car toys: Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit! The amount of brain power that must have been tapped into in order to just conceive of this concept is astonishing . . . and then actually bringing the idea into reality? And *then* having it actually work as well as it does? It's an innovation for the ages! All credit to the team of developers at Velan Studios, the new home to some industry vets who've been pushing the boundaries of tech on Nintendo hardware for a few decades now. This is just their latest magic!

BEST REVIVAL
STREETS OF RAGE 4

Another new award here, as we find ourselves in the midst of a renaissance of resurrection, with great gaming brands of the past being brought back to life in the modern era. Over 25 years have passed since the release of Streets of Rage 3, but 2020's incredible sequel beautifully reinvigorated the dormant franchise!

BEST DLC
POKÉMON SWORD & SHIELD EXPANSION PASS

2020 oddly didn't offer a new Pokémon quest . . . because 2019's was still in progress! Game Freak and The Pokémon Company fully embraced DLC in an extreme shift in marketing strategy compared to the past, and Trainers rejoiced at the change!

THE 2020 NINTENDO FORCE GAME OF THE YEAR

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

Since the very beginnings of the video game industry decades ago, there has been no one year more tumultuous for humanity as a whole than 2020. The greatest video game released within that 12-month span, then, must be the one that helped millions of players cope with the anxiety and physical separation brought on by the still-ongoing coronavirus pandemic: Animal Crossing: New Horizons. In a world in which it was unsafe to leave your home, New Horizons let you travel to a faraway island. In a time in which it was impossible to get together in person with groups of friends, New Horizons let you gather virtually and still enjoy each other's company. And in a mental state, for many, dominated by a feeling of lack of control over life, New Horizons offered a place in which you were entirely in control, making decisions as small as the direction a single piece of furniture would face in your virtual home all the way up to as grand as the shape of the island's entire land mass. Even if 2020 had been a "normal" year, this would still have been a sensational sequel in the Animal Crossing series. But the timing of its release – in late March, just after lockdowns began across the majority of the United States – elevated it to become a cultural event. 2020 brought so much pain and loss to so many. But thankfully, it also brought us Animal Crossing: New Horizons, which helped so many of us to heal.

RETRO

KING OF THE RACETRACK

F-1 RACE
GAME BOY, 1991

Everyone is well aware of Bowser's first NES appearance, since it also served as his first appearance in any game ever – but what about his Game Boy debut? Since he was not the antagonist of Super Mario Land, King Koopa had to settle for a cameo. Unfortunately, it's one that very few people ever got to see! Nintendo's F-1 Race – which first sped into American stores exactly 30 years ago, in February 1991 – rewarded racers with the visual of a variety of Nintendo mascots cheering them on after each successful finish on one of the game's Grand Prix tracks. But F-1 Race was infamously difficult, as it demanded that players claim first place in each race in order to move on to the next. And Bowser's cameo came at the very end of the campaign, meaning they had to clear the whole game perfectly – in one sitting – to get to see him! **— LUCAS**

LEFT IN THE PAST

SUPER MARIO ALL-STARS + SUPER MARIO WORLD

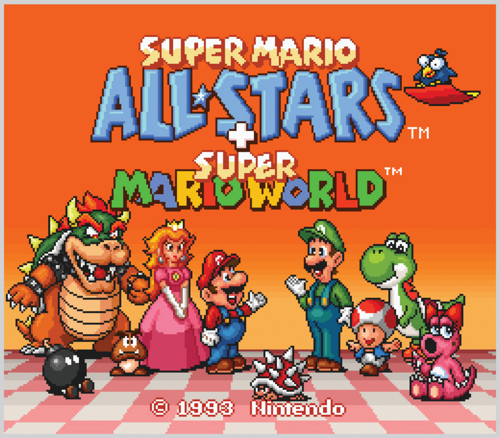
Only late adopters of the SNES could claim a copy of this combo cart!

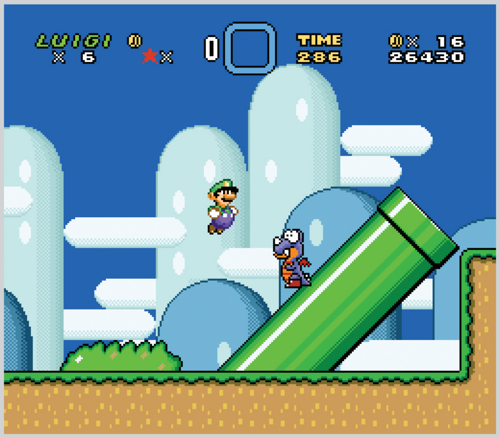
MARIO'S ANNIVERSARY HAS turned out to be quite the celebration! Super Mario 3D All-Stars probably made the biggest waves, but over on Nintendo Switch Online, that game's 16-bit namesake also made its Switch debut. The original Super NES classic Super Mario All-Stars was added to the service, and a whole new audience is now getting to experience one of Nintendo's most legendary remastering projects.

But, once upon a time, Nintendo quietly remastered that remaster, and the upgrades made a "world" of difference.

Re-releasing older games with new features is pretty commonplace these days. Heck, we have an entire section dedicated to it in this very issue! But before Nintendo started adding New Funky Modes and tossing the word "Deluxe" around left and right, they set the bar for re-releases so high, even they've rarely been able to reach that level again since.

The original Super Mario All-Stars was already the best deal in video games when it launched. It featured all three NES Mario games with complete visual and audio overhauls, the Famicom version of Super Mario Bros. 2 localized for the first time and loads more, making it both a tremendous value and an instant success.





But about a year later, Nintendo decided that wasn't enough. They re-released the re-releases, this time including an altered version of the original SNES pack-in game, Super Mario World.

So what was new? Besides some admittedly bare-bones cartridge art, once you turned it on you'd notice that the iconic title screen had seen some big changes. It still featured a group of Mario characters hanging out chatting, but now the backdrop was an evening orange color instead of blue, and the checkerboard tile on the floor had been changed from blue to pink. Birdo was sitting down now instead of standing, the Spiny had shifted closer to the middle and Yoshi had decided to join the party. Of course, the title itself also reflected the addition of Super Mario World, but the word "All-Stars" had been changed from gold to blue.

On the game selection menu, the box scans for Super Mario Bros. and Super Mario Bros. 3 were inexplicably replaced with later revisions of those games, and The Lost Levels now had the phrase "UNRELEASED in the USA" stamped on its game box and written underneath the menu title (in case you somehow missed it the first time).

Everything else remained unchanged . . . except of course the addition of a wholly unique version of Super Mario World!

It now featured four save slots instead of three, each accessed via the game selection menu. You no longer got a star on your file when you unlocked all the hidden exits, but there was an adorable winking Yoshi icon where the controller settings normally were, so it balanced out!

The biggest change though came in the form of Luigi's wacky new sprite set, which you can read all about in the sidebar. Unlike in Super Mario Advance 2 (which featured its own unique Luigi sprites), the younger plumber's new look is purely cosmetic here, as are all of the alterations in this collection.

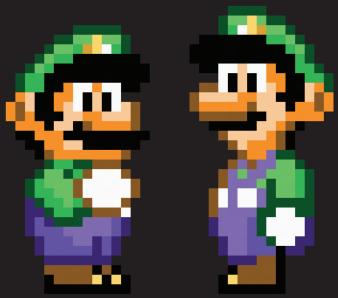
Considering the work that went into this game, Nintendo was uncharacteristically quiet about its release. There isn't even a physical box for the game outside of Europe, and it was never released in Japan at all. Here in the United States, fans could only acquire a copy by buying new SNES hardware – just as Super Mario World had been a system pack-in alone, so too was it again even when joined together with All-Stars on a brand-new combo cart. The bundle went on sale in 1994, so anyone who'd already jumped into the 16-bit era before that likely missed this!

It may be a little weird, but this uncommon re-remaster is arguably the definitive way to play some of the best games ever made! – **KRIS**

ORIGINAL RELEASE: SNES, DECEMBER 1994 (NORTH AMERICA); 1995 (EUROPE)
PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO

PLAYING IT TODAY

Both All-Stars and World have been re-released several times, but this specific version has never resurfaced on any platform. Since it was a pack-in title, cartridges aren't too terribly hard to track down. However, given how late in the Super NES' life it was released and the quality of the content, getting one for yourself can be a somewhat expensive endeavor: Carts fetch upwards of $30.



BEFORE & AFTER

Like the previous games in this collection, Luigi's appearance in Super Mario World has been altered to make him look more distinct from Mario. No longer a mere palette swap, his head and body more closely resemble the traditional Luigi design – though the proportions seem a little odd. His arms have a lanky swing as he walks, he doesn't put his fist up when he jumps (meaning he actually hits blocks with his head), he slides down hills on his knees and he crosses his arms when he beats a level instead of flashing the victory sign. But if you think that stuff's strange, wait until you see what happens when he gets a Fire Flower: Instead of throwing fireballs, Luigi lifts his arms and legs, closes his eyes and actually spits fire out of his mouth!

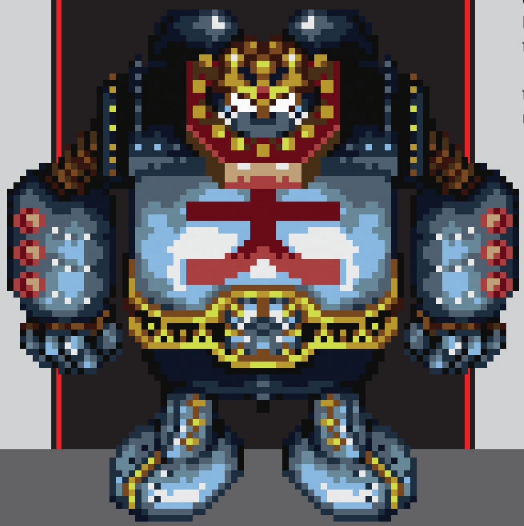
ORIGINAL RELEASE: SUPER FAMICOM, SEPTEMBER 2, 1994
PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE

PLAYING IT TODAY

The only way to play Live A Live other than with its original cart is if you own a Japanese New Nintendo 3DS or Wii U – Live A Live is available for purchase on Virtual Console on both platforms. And you can download a complete English translation patch, thanks to a multi-year effort from Aeon Genesis! It features unique fonts for every chapter, from primitive scribbles for Pogo to wanted poster lettering for the Sundown Kid. As for an official English version, there are no plans currently, although the name was trademarked in the United States, Australia and Europe last summer. With Square Enix recently releasing English translations of games like Trials of Mana on the Switch, could Live A Live someday be next?

HOPE, PERHAPS?

This past October, a livestreamed 26th anniversary event for Live A Live reunited four members of the original production team: director Tokita, battle planner Inoue, composer Shimomura and pixel artist Kazuyuki Kurashima. They answered fan questions, reminisced and watched a recording of the 2019 Live A Live 25th anniversary concert. One of the questions asked about Live A Live potentially getting a Western release, and Tokita answered by mentioning that the livestream was only made possible through fan support, and that fan support may someday make a new Live A Live project possible!



LOST IN UNTRANSLATION
LIVE A LIVE

Looking back on Square's other 16-bit era-hopping RPG!

ONE YEAR BEFORE Crono, Marle, Lucca and their friends spanned the eras in their quest to save their world from being devoured by Lavos, Square Enix released Live A Live in 1994 – another time-traveling title that featured heroes hopping across both time and space, but with separate stories (and genres) coming together and combining for the finale.

There are seven main chapters, each with a main character that was designed by a manga artist published by Shogakukan, one of Japan's "Big Three" manga publishers. The one most recognizable to readers of the day was Case Closed creator Gosho Aoyama, who created Oboro-maru, the ninja. Live A Live was also the directorial debut of Takashi Tokita, who later worked on Chrono Trigger and was the director of Parasite Eve on the PlayStation, and it was the first game Yoko Shimomura composed for Square Enix after her work at Capcom.

At the dawn of time, Pogo the caveman and his partner Gori encounter the cavewoman Beru while on the hunt for missing food, and save her from being the next meal for the bloodthirsty dinosaur O-D-O. In the American West, the Sundown Kid and his rival Mad Dog put aside their feud and help a small town defend themselves against the Crazy Bunch, led by O. Dio. In China, the master of the Xin Shan Quan kung fu school is on the hunt for a successor when his school is attacked by his rival Odi Wang Lee, forcing his successor to take vengeance into their own fists. In the squared circle, mixed martial artist Masaru Takahara trains to one day take on the dangerous and deadly Odie Oldbright. In the feudal era of Japan, ninja Oboro-maru is sent on a stealth mission into the stronghold of the warlord Ode Iou. In a near future straight out of a tokusatsu series, psychic orphan Akira Tadokoro must rescue his friends and family from the evil Cult of Odeo. And in the far future, a monster escapes from its confinement and causes chaos aboard the starship Cogito Ergosum, and Cube (a round-shaped robot) finds that the ship's computer, OD-10, is to blame.

Notice a pattern here? That's because everything comes together once the eighth story is unveiled: the story of Oersted, who teams up with his friend Straybow, the mage Uranus and the veteran hero Hash to rescue Princess Alicia of Lucretia from her abductor, the Demon King. Without going into much detail, let's just say that things go horribly, *horribly* wrong – so wrong that a new Demon King, Odio, is born. In the final chapters, Odio draws the seven heroes to his ruined kingdom from across spacetime, where they have a weighty decision to make: Do they traverse the labyrinth and defeat Odio once and for all, or spare him once they learn his secret? Or will you play *as* Odio and possibly bring about the destruction of all creation?

The battle system, which is a combination of turn-based and tactical RPG mechanics, was the creation of Nobuyuki Inoue, who would later go on to form the studio Brownie Brown and direct Mother 3. On your turn, you can move freely on a 7x7 checkerboard battle grid before making your move, with various attacks and buffs at your disposal. Each character has their own skills both inside and outside of battle, from Pogo being able to sniff out game to Sundown Kid's sharpshooting to Masaru's learning techniques from his opponents. There's no suggested order in tackling the chapters, but I found a few of them a little more difficult than the others.

Live A Live only sold around 270,000 copies, but it still has a strong fanbase. Oersted reappeared in the mobile game Final Fantasy Dimensions II, a couple of tracks were included as DLC in Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call on the 3DS and Odio's theme "Megalomania" helped to inspire another iconic RPG battle theme: Undertale's "Megalovania!" **– REBECCA**

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

ISSUE #80 OF Nintendo Power kicked off the new year of 1996 in a way that might have made some of the staff blush a little in hindsight, hailing it as a "NU" year, with those letters casting a "64"-shaped shadow – of course reflecting the upcoming Nintendo Ultra 64. But by the time it arrived, the system would have a slightly different name!

A new year brings new changes, and that held true for the Power Charts, which were now truncated down to a single page. Killer Instinct ruled the Super NES roost, while The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening and VB Wario Land topped the Game Boy and Virtual Boy rankings, respectively. The Ultra 64 remained the #1 Most Wanted, and Japan's Top 5 tormented fans of Square's Secret of Mana with its untranslated sequel sitting atop that list.

Other features included 14 pages of Nintendo 64 coming "out of the shadows" at Space World, showing off numerous games that would be a bit different by the time we got our hands on them – if we did at all. Then there was the Super Power Club subscriber "Members Only Special" section, which featured NP's Best of '95 (Donkey Kong Country 2, Donkey Kong Land and VB Wario Land), Ken Griffey Jr.'s Winning Run, a Power Passwords Special, a DKC2 calendar and a behind-the-scenes at Disney Interactive. And an Earthworm Jim 2 board game!

Super NES coverage highlighted Earthworm Jim 2, Revolution X: Music is the Weapon featuring Aerosmith, Mutant Chronicles: Doom Troopers, Scooby-Doo Mystery, PGA Tour '96, Final Fight 3 and an Epic Center packed with Breath of Fire II and Secret of Evermore. Jack Bros. was the featured Virtual Boy game this month, and Tetris Blast blasted onto Super Game Boy. On regular GB, Frank Thomas Big Hurt Baseball and The Getaway: High Speed II raced into action.

Alongside a Player's Poll prize of a trip to E3 '96, Pak Watch closed things out with Mega Man X3, which would be covered in NP #81 alongside MechWarrior 3050, Toy Story and Syndicate for SNES. The Virtual Boy game-of-the-month this time featured none other than Nintendo Power's own former mascot in Nester's Funky Bowling! Titus also got a special section to highlight three of their upcoming SNES titles in Prehistorik Man, Ardy Lightfoot and Sink or Swim.

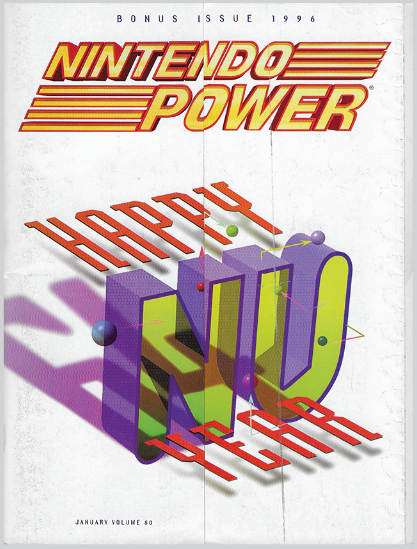
Sports Scene returned with a less-newspapery look at PGA European Tour, NBA Live '96 and FIFA Soccer '96. Meanwhile, Epic Center retained its normal charm with further looks at Breath of Fire II and Secret of Evermore, plus a look at Dragon Quest VI. It also featured news of a new, upcoming rival for Yoshi in Super Mario RPG named Washi (Warui + Yoshi), who would ultimately actually be localized into "Boshi" (perhaps a literal translation of "Bad + Yoshi"?) for the West.

Perhaps of greater interest now is the online game featured at the time in the Epic Center portion of Nintendo Power Source, "Metroid: Blood of the Chozo," which eschewed Zebes, Mother Brain and the like in favor of a mystery about violent Chozo who emerged from deep space.

The biggest highlight, however, was surely the cover story: an eight-page overview of the arcade-exclusive Killer Instinct 2. If that wasn't enough Rare for you, Cranky Kong's Top 10 Tips for getting 102% in this issue's Power Chart-topping DKC2 shared poster space with Ken Griffey Jr.

An interesting Pak Watch featured some cancelled titles such as Bound High for Virtual Boy and Lobo for SNES, and the Player's Poll closed things out with a prize of a trip to Disneyland to go behind the scenes at Disney Interactive. — **DAVID**

ISSUE #80: **JANUARY 1996**



ISSUE #81: **FEBRUARY 1996**

KING KOOPA MAKES HIS 3D DEBUT

Among the Nintendo 64 games shown off at Shoshinkai/Space World was, of course, Super Mario 64. Two pages covered the game in NP #80, as there was much to show – from the castle grounds to helping lost penguins to spikeless Thwomps and more. But what else could stand bigger and badder than the 3D debut of the big bad himself, Bowser? One of the early highlights of the game was showing Mario squaring off against his now-squarier nemesis, along with the then-revolutionary flame effects the Koopa King brought to the dance. Unfortunately for Bowser, Mario's kind of dance here would involve swinging and large mines.

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

INTERVIEW

DATE + PLACE OF BIRTH
August 13, 1982 in New York, New York

FAVORITE FOOD
Southern fried chicken and skirt steak

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT
I have had a goal to learn Cantonese so I can speak to my best friend's parents for over 20 years. Maybe one day.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Game Designer, Producer, Artist, Music Publisher and Conference Organizer

BEST KNOWN FOR
Treachery in Beatdown City, working with Open Mike Eagle on a rap song for TiBC and speaking at many, many conferences.

SHAWN ALEXANDER ALLEN

New York City native. Liberty City hype man. Beatdown City architect.

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: How did you get started in the game industry?

SHAWN: I'd say message boards, honestly. IGN's message boards are where I became a moderator 20 years ago and got to meet real-life game writers online. I then attended my first E3 17 years ago as an EB Games employee, sleeping on the floor of a fellow moderator's hotel room and eating at the Denny's nearby every day. No one wanted to talk to me at E3 – you'd strike up a conversation, they'd see your badge, ask what you do, and then stop caring soon after.

My first "games industry" job was at Rockstar Games working on making all the trailers you see online. (From Grand Theft Auto IV to V and everything in between). My favorite game that I got to work on was Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars for the DS.

When I returned to E3 having put out Red Dead Redemption, EVERYONE wanted to talk to me. Very sobering experience.

How did your work at Rockstar shape your goals with the development of Treachery in Beatdown City?

Working at Rockstar, I got to see what games were like on a massive scale; what went on behind the scenes – and I decided I wanted to do the exact opposite: smaller, more personal games with well-defined worlds. Besides trailers, I did get to write and/or voice some pedestrians in GTA IV, Red Dead Redemption, Midnight Club: Los Angeles, etc., and that gave me a feel for making deeper dialogue for seemingly throwaway characters.

What inspired you to take the beat-'em-up genre and re-adapt it for the turn-based strategy genre?

We set out to make "the best beat-'em-up ever" because we were unsatisfied with the newer attempts when Xbox Live Arcade became a thing. Even playing older beat-'em-ups, we were kinda like, some of these just didn't hold up. While working on the game our attempts just weren't making us happy.

One day it seemed we needed a miracle to keep the project going and I was distraught, because it seemed like we weren't making enough progress. Then later that day I had a shower moment where I thought back to combat in Super Mario RPG, Fallout 3 and the little-known N64 cult classic Hybrid Heaven, and it all sorta clicked. We then spent the next few months going in that direction and were way happier with it because it actually worked, and was pretty fun!

How much of Treachery's story comes from your real-life experiences?

I like to say the game is very much a kinda Dante's Inferno meets Wizard of Oz meets Final Fight – the game is completely a response to growing up in a dense city filled with aggressive people, and throws a lot of them into villain roles, like Dante did in his book. The Wizard of Oz bit is how the game reflects people I know or have personal feelings for, like the heroes and big baddie.

The game explores the gig economy, dense EULAs, completely mismatched dating, using apps for everything, the surveillance state, violent cops, personal identity, respectability politics and more – all things that are very relevant to my life. Many of the encounters in the game are pulled from everyday interactions I've had with people.

As a New Yorker, what are some games that you think do a particularly good (or lousy) job at recreating city life?

NBA Street Vol. 2 is PERFECT. (PLEASE EA BRING THIS BACK!) From the moment the credits start, it feels like the city. It's even got Bobbito Garcia, a true New Yorker/trick basketballer/DJ/OG sneakerhead doing commentary. It was such a loving testament to the culture around street basketball and hip-hop as well.

GTA IV's Bohan area (The Bronx) feels a lot like the Lower East Side, where I grew up. But the game is also missing key neighborhoods (that upset me) while having way too much focus on Times Square, which feels like a very un-NY thing to focus on. Weirdly, I feel like Chinatown Wars did a better job of conveying the feeling of the city. I gave a talk about cities and games years ago; I should turn it into a video.

That being said, I don't think games in general do enough work to frame cities as best as they can. When you see a movie like Mean Streets, or even a show like Seinfeld, you see it much more there (even though most of Seinfeld was shot in LA). Games with cities just feel . . . a bit too *off* for my tastes – either they're too empty, are missing any real personality, or something in between.

I felt like Double Dragon on the NES was like an expressionist painting of '80s NYC vibe-wise (the COLORS!), and that's why I based my visual aesthetic on that game specifically.

A lot of Switch owners first heard about Treachery through your T-shirt that appears in Travis Strikes Again. How did that crossover come about, and are there any other developers you'd like to collaborate with in a more expanded scope?

That was fun to do. SUDA-san and I are pals; we've been chatting about stuff for years now, like when I recounted the environmental storytelling in Killer7 and he said, "You remember it better than I do!" (PLEASE BRING IT TO SWITCH). I actually introduced him to Hotline Miami, which he then pushed for release in Japan.

After they announced indie partnerships, I saw SUDA-san at an event and he asked if I wanted to be involved in Travis Strikes Again – and I of course said YEAH!!!!!!! At that point what was happening in the game hadn't been announced yet, so I just wondered for a bit, until I received an email with a shirt template and a release to sign.

I'm really glad with how it came out. So much so we made the shirt IRL!

In terms of a game collab, it might seem cliché, but I'd love to work with SUDA-san on an original title. I still have this Killer7-inspired game script I wrote many years ago, lol (designed for the DS, but the Switch could work too).

Did you have an ideal audience in mind for Treachery, or was your process more bottom-up driven, with your hopes that it would find its fans naturally?

Bottom up for sure – I wanted people who wanted more interesting combat in games to dig it. The demographic was basically me, and I figured others out there would vibe with it, and they have, which is dope.

What can people expect from future installments in Treachery's ongoing story?

Some seriously wild stuff. It's only gonna get weirder, darker and more satirical. I keep watching Total Recall, Escape from New York and The Running Man for inspiration.

On top of making games, you also co-organize the annual Game Devs of Color Expo. What are some of the things you've learned from that experience that you'd like to pass on to our readers?

I just want to give some quick context since I feel like a lot of folks won't know what it is.

The Game Devs of Color Expo has been going for five years, with the last one happening September 18 - 20. We're sponsored by Nintendo, even, as well as Xbox, Valve, Brace Yourself Games (Cadence of Hyrule), Subset Games (Into the Breach) and a lot, lot more. Our event is focused on highlighting game devs from marginalized racial/ethnic backgrounds: showing their games, giving talks, sharing knowledge and culture. Every year it's been SO GOOD, thankfully.

People ask about "segregation" or "not caring about what the creator looks like, just make good games" and that ignores that the games industry has a ton of inequality and marginalized people who just have a huge struggle even making those "good games" – and a lot of it is geared toward people who have some sort of wealth or financing from the government.

Through events like ours, we give a spotlight on GREAT GAMES made by GREAT DEVS who just don't always have $2,000 to show at PAX or something. We let people exhibit for free, we pay everyone we work with and we fly people in if they need help. We've flown people in from South Africa and Australia as well as a bunch of places in the US and Canada who loved the experience. We want to get more folks to NYC if we can. Our most recent event was online and let us involve even more people.

I've learned what I think I already knew: There's a huge hole for an event like this because every other event is so hard to break into.

People leave our event invigorated and happy, and not tired and sick, so that's always been great.

If you had an unlimited budget to make a game within any Nintendo franchise, which would you choose and why?

I really like the darker Zelda games, like Zelda II, Link's Awakening and Majora's Mask; the basic "dark side of the moon" sequels to each of the main games, so probably that. I would love to see a Zelda game that had that hopeless feel of Zelda II, along with the world on the verge of destruction of Majora's Mask, and the combined weirdness of MM and Link's Awakening – maybe a combat-focused roguelike or something.

I'd like to make a game that has Ketsuya Terada-san as the art director, with the whole game integrating his art style in 3D. Would be AMAZING.

Any hints about future projects?

Everything I'm looking to work on will be something you've never seen before in games.

BY MATTHEW TARANTO

REVIEWS

The biggest, grandest, most epic small-scale adventure of miniature heroes is back for an encore appearance . . . *plus* it's had new features and story content added too! Read the conclusion of our review of **Pikmin 3 Deluxe**!

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E10+

The Wii U Story + More!

PIKMIN 3 DELUXE

THIS IS THE perfect Pikmin package.

In our last issue, I kicked off this review of Pikmin 3 Deluxe on Switch by first replaying Pikmin 3 Non-Deluxe on Wii U. As I re-experienced the tale of Alph, Brittany and Charlie, I got myself reacquainted with the magic of this wonderful miniature world, but also reminded myself of some aspects of the game design that weren't quite perfect in that first appearance. I ended up assembling a little laundry list of elements I hoped would be improved upon in this new Switch port.

Nearly all of them were! Honestly, I didn't expect quite this much extra effort would be put into this re-release – but I've been left impressed. Let's go down that list one item at a time.

First up, the awkward way the Wii U version had you jumping back and forth between the TV screen and the GamePad display. With the GamePad gone, everything has indeed been fully streamlined to take place just in one view. A minor amount of visual data is lost in the transition, but I didn't miss it, and assigning marching orders to inactive captains is now easier than ever.

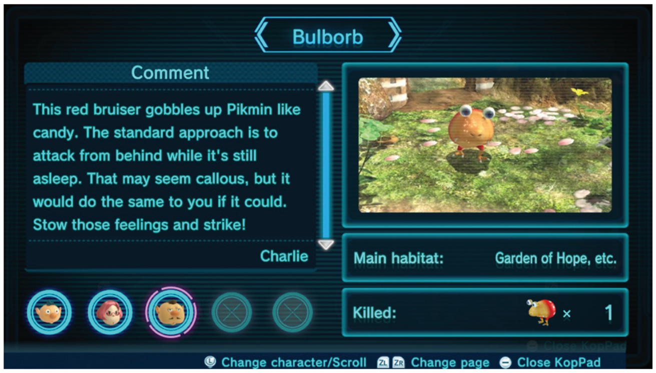
That's critical, because effective multitasking is really the name of the game here. Pikmin 3 is an efficiency challenge more than anything, as you have to precisely manage the move-ments of three different captains and up to 100 individual Pikmin soldiers at a time. This is especially the case in Mission Mode, in which you're given only 10 minutes or so to complete a retrieval of every treasure in an area, or to totally destroy every enemy.

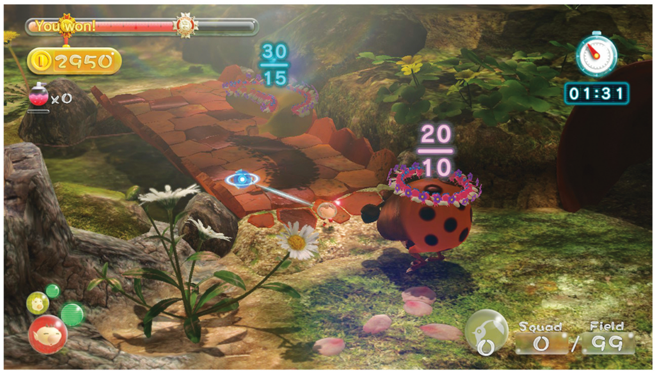
I never liked Mission Mode before. That was another of my complaints last time: I hated the countdown clock in the Wii U version, as after your fixed amount of minutes elapsed, you got kicked out of the Mission – you'd have to start from scratch if you didn't finish all the objectives, but wanted to. But Pikmin 3 Deluxe has redeemed this whole huge area of the game for me with the simple addition of "After Hours." Now if you play a Mission and run out of time, you can simply choose to continue for as long as you like, taking however much extra time you need. What a blessing! It's rewarding now to earn medals for quick comple-tion times, but I love being able to just feel the accomplishment of having fully finished a Mission, even slowly.

Feeling encouraged to actually play Mission Mode has multiplied my total play time versus the amount of hours I spent with the Wii U original. And there are more Missions included here as well, since all the old DLC is in by default, plus the two new Side Stories: Olimar's Assignment and Olimar's Comeback.

Yes, both the promised prologue and epilogue are organized as a set of new Missions rather than more free-flowing Story content. I was bummed by that at first, but then reversed my opinion when I saw the flexibility that the developers had pushed into these 14 total new challenges (four in the prologue, 10 in the epilogue). There is a lot of variety here! There are some new spins on Pikmin gameplay that feel like they might be a small look ahead at ideas that Pikmin 4 maybe could develop further in the future.

There's escort quest gameplay, for one example. Normally Pikmin stages have your characters start off at home base, then venture into the wild to fight foes and find treasures, then bring items back to the starting point to spawn new Pikmin or add to your treasure total. Some parts of the new Olimar story spin that formula by instead starting you off a dangerous distance away from your end goal and tasking you with clearing a safe path through treacherous terrain filled with enemies, so that your Pikmin can safely haul an item through without getting eaten. In another Mission, Olimar and Louie are separated, and the win condition is simply to reunite them – but there are a bunch of stone walls in the way, so the challenge becomes sourcing enough explosive Bomb Rocks to break through while, again, keeping your soldiers from becoming some creature's snacks. It's creative. It's new. It has me even more excited for the franchise's future.





One thing I knew I'd miss from the Wii U version was the precision of the Wii Remote control scheme – you're just not going to get aiming accuracy like that without that same motion-controlled pointer hardware. Luckily, Pikmin 3 Deluxe compensates for not being able to so exactly toss Pikmin at enemies one at a time by rendering that old fighting technique nearly irrelevant! Ladies and gentle 'min, the Charge attack is now the aggressive assault of choice.

I got frustrated about that on Wii U too, since telling your Pikmin to "Charge!" was mapped to a Nunchuk gesture that wouldn't always register right. Now it's on a button (which would have been enough of an improvement), but it's also easier to use in practice, too. Lock on and charge an enemy and your whole squad will swarm on and destroy them in seconds flat. Lock on and charge at a treasure or fallen foe and the exact number of Pikmin needed to carry it will – and the rest will come right back to you. It's invaluable.

Simple gameplay mechanic/control tweaks like that go a long way toward seriously improving a game's fun factor in a re-release like this. I loved Pikmin 3 already, but I love it even more now that it was legitimately reassessed by its developers and made even better for this encore appearance.

That's almost the entire laundry list addressed – but the last item on it is, sadly, the one wish that Pikmin 3 Deluxe didn't grant. I was hopeful that the cliffhanger ending of the Pikmin 3 Wii U story would get resolved. It doesn't. Olimar's Comeback is an epilogue that does take place after the main tale ends, and it is explained that Olimar and Louie returning to PNF-404 is what we saw happening at the end of the credits way back in 2013. (They come back to retrieve the S.S. Dolphin, since Hocotate Freight's President didn't like them crashing it and then just leaving it there when they caught a ride home with the Koppai crew.) But the Koppai crew's loose story thread isn't tied up: The mystery of why they crash-landed on the Pikmin planet in the first place is still, sadly, a mystery even now. Once again, we'll have to cross our fingers and hope for Pikmin 4 to rematerialize at some point in the future!

For now, though, Pikmin 3 Deluxe really is the perfect Pikmin package. Plus, I'm not even done yet! I still want to teach Carter how to play so I can go through the adventure again in the newly added co-op mode! Plus test myself with Ultra-Spicy difficulty! Plus . . . **– LUCAS**

9.5

A Small Gift for Nintendo's Biggest Fans

GAME & WATCH: SUPER MARIO BROS.

A GREAT GIFT reflects a deep understanding between the giver and the receiver. It may be something ridiculous, or something you don't think you really deserve, but because someone loves you, they got it for you anyway.

Game & Watch: Super Mario Bros. is all those things. It's Nintendo's frivolous gift to us, the people who love their weird brand of whimsy. It's also arguably overpriced (at $49.99), so by buying it, we're giving Nintendo the gift of our cash as well, and the company is undoubtedly grateful for the support. The inside flap of the product's box even says "Special Thanks To You" as you open it, adding an extra layer of intimacy to what is already their most precious, adorable piece of hardware to date.

Like the special edition NES LEGO set, Game & Watch: Super Mario Bros. is a detailed love letter to both Nintendo's history in console development and the mustachioed mascot who made them a household name. It celebrates Super Mario Bros.' (and Bowser's!) 35th birthday, and also the 40th birthday of Nintendo's very first piece of handheld hardware, a little device called Game & Watch: Ball.

It contains the original NES version of Super Mario Bros., its direct sequel Super Mario Bros.: The Lost Levels (a.k.a. Japan's Super Mario Bros. 2), a new Mario-ified version of Ball (an extremely simple juggling game) and a "Watch" mode that turns the system into a clock.

If that sounds sort of unspectacular to you, you're not alone. The clerk who sold me the system at Best Buy asked me "So . . . why the hype for this thing?", looking deeply confused at the words "COLOR SCREEN" on the box, as if that's a real selling point in the world of 4K TVs, game-streaming services, PS5s and Xbox Series Xs.

The simple answer to his question is this is a toy made by people and for people who want to go back to a time when games weren't "immersive multi-sensory experiences" and were instead cute little diversions filled with silly, heartfelt surprises. Just as every block or brick in Super Mario Bros. may contain a hidden treasure, every second that ticks by in Watch mode stars Mario running by beneath the time, always on the cusp of the unexpected. There are 35 secrets here in all, from the "Drawing Mario" musical art tutorial (find it by holding down A in Watch mode), to cameos from Yoshi, Luigi and other favorites at certain minutes during a given hour. Turning on Watch mode throughout the day to see if any surprises might pop up has become a regular practice for me since I purchased the system. I keep it in my pocket all the time, and when I have a free moment, I boot it up to see what's there, and it always makes me smile.

The hardware itself is sturdy and responsive. I've already dropped mine a few times with no ill effects, and though playing a precision platformer on a super-small display is tough, the Control Pad and buttons are springy and spongy, making it easy to still feel connected to the boisterous on-screen action.

There's no denying that this is a luxury purchase. Anyone who can't find this little limited-time item for sale shouldn't really fear missing out, as all the games and secrets here can either be played elsewhere or found for free online. That said, just like the magazine you're reading right now, Game & Watch: Super Mario Bros. just feels good to hold in your hands. It's a physical sign of affection from Nintendo to its fans. It's a gift – and I'm glad I was able to receive it.

– JONATHAN

8.0

G&W PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

Rhythm and Remembrance

KINGDOM HEARTS: MELODY OF MEMORY

DISNEY AND NINTENDO are both dedicated to family-friendly entertainment. Kingdom Hearts is the biggest Disney-branded franchise in gaming. Ergo, Kingdom Hearts on Nintendo platforms would be a perfect fit! So why has Square Enix been so reluctant to port the Kingdom Hearts back catalog to any Nintendo home console?

That was my frame of mind going into Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory, a musical celebration of the entire chronology . . . and the only entry in the Nintendo ecosystem since 2012. It's like reminiscing with old friends about your youthful escapades, only to realize you weren't actually present for their biggest shared moments. At least if you're a Kingdom Hearts veteran or just a fan of world-class composer Yoko Shimomura, you'll be well-served by this rhythmic saunter down memory lane!

Billed as a successor to the fan-favorite Theatrhythm series, Melody of Memory delivers more than 140 songs from every installment up through Kingdom Hearts III via autoscrolling setpieces. By tapping the appropriate buttons in time with the music, your selected three-hero party will smack incoming Heartless and Nobodies, dodge ranged attacks, cast spells or collect music notes hovering in the air.

This title certainly doesn't skimp when it comes to presentation. In lieu of a basic song list, the main World Tour mode has you piloting a Gummi Ship between various worlds – clustered together by source game – and performing songs unique to those worlds. Also along the way, you're treated to short recaps of key series events (though if you aren't already intimately familiar with Kingdom Hearts' obtuse lore, I wouldn't suggest attempting to seriously follow this clumsy abridgment).

Field Battle stages recreate a given world's ambience, from the undersea hues of Atlantica to the digital landscape of Space Paranoids, and feature themed enemies that execute distracting movement patterns to smartly draw your attention away from maintaining your rhythm. The other types of stages that appear less often are Boss Battles – rather self-explanatory – and Memory Dives, which are montages of past game cutscenes with an accompanying musical track. These are my least favorite levels, because while enemies in Field Battles are purposefully designed to distract, these background movies are ill-suited as rhythm game window dressing and result in needless visual clutter.

Furthermore, Memory Dives rob players of the opportunity to navigate a carefully curated track of enemies and obstacles. The Kingdom Hearts III section of World Tour consists almost entirely of Memory Dives – this zone, meant to be the climax of your musical odyssey, instead feels like a product of rushed development. Was there a behind-the-scenes reason why KHIII songs couldn't be adapted into proper Field Battle sequences?

And while I gave props to the lead composer Yoko Shimomura earlier, a large percentage of her pieces are intended to be short loops. This is fine for a game with a focus on combat and exploration, but leads to tedium when the music itself is the focus. I would have much preferred if Square Enix had opted for a setlist that contained more long-form arrangements rather than the current one, drowning in direct game rips.

What most winds up dragging down Melody of Memory, ironically, is that it tries too hard to be a Kingdom Hearts adventure rather than a cohesive rhythm game. There's an experience system to raise your party's stats, but the impact of these buffs on actual performance is negligible. There's a crafting menu that allows you to convert raw materials into gallery art and additional songs, but simply purchasing these items with one unified currency would have been far more convenient. Then of course there's the super important end-game movie, because it wouldn't be a Kingdom Hearts game if details crucial to understanding the series' Byzantine plot weren't locked behind completion . . . even if said game is about "tapping buttons in time with the music."

Thankfully, you need not pay that padding any mind to enjoy good tunes alongside your pals Donald and Goofy. But boy, isn't that just the Kingdom Hearts saga in a nutshell! **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPERS: SQUARE ENIX & INDIESZERO RATING: E10+

7.0

Strike First. Strike Hard. No Mercy!

COBRA KAI: THE KARATE KID SAGA CONTINUES

COBRA KAI IS a surprisingly good TV show. Given the increasing decline in quality of the Karate Kid movie sequels it follows up on, it could have gone terribly wrong. Instead, it takes what worked about the original franchise (cheese and all) and expands on it in a heartfelt and fun way. It's action-packed when it needs to be, but it's also emotionally resonant.

Cobra Kai: The Karate Kid Saga Continues was never going to be able to match the show's dramatic impact – nor did it have the advantage of a comparable video game history to draw from. There was a somewhat decent NES game and a strange little fighter on Amiga and Atari ST in the late '80s, but that's it. So Cobra Kai the game forges its own path, and similar to the show, it's surprisingly good.

Well, more like "surprisingly not bad." Cobra Kai is a beat-'em-up, akin to something like Streets of Rage. Continuity-wise, it doesn't really fit in with the show, seemingly taking place after Season 2, but in an alternate reality where ice punches and fire kicks are a regular occurrence. It's sort of self aware about it though, occasionally breaking the fourth wall to amusing effect.

The characters themselves are designed to look like their TV counterparts, and they're all fairly recognizable in a weird caricature kind of way. Some voice actors reprise their roles for the game too, including Ralph Macchio and William Zabka as Daniel and Johnny.

When you start, you choose to play as either Cobra Kai or Miyagi-Do. As Cobra Kai your team is Johnny, Miguel, Hawk and Tory, while Miyagi-Do gives you Daniel, Samantha, Robby and Demetri.

The story plays out mostly the same no matter which team you choose, but you get to see it unfold from different perspectives. It all boils down to some sort of mysterious (yet ultimately unsurprising) third party pitting Cobra Kai and Miyagi-Do against one another, with each of them constantly assuming the other is at fault. In order to find out who the true mastermind is, you have to play through both campaigns. It isn't Shakespeare, but I did find myself legitimately interested in seeing how it all ended.

The bosses are all characters from the show, which is cool, though having superpowered fistfights with Johnny's landlord and Daniel's auto sales rival is hilariously weird. What's less hilarious is the fact that a lot of the people you're fighting in the game are kids, which would be fine if it was just the kids from the dojos doing the fighting, but there were definitely a couple of instances where I felt pretty weird about being 52-year-old Johnny Lawrence walking around beating up a bunch of high school girls, even if they were armed with baseball bats.

The gameplay mechanics are surprisingly in-depth, with multiple skill trees for each character and dojo. It all seems pretty complicated at first, but it's evened out by the fact that the special moves they unlock don't cost you anything to use. Surrounded by enemies? Spam those specials all you want! They're balanced by a brief cooldown time, but otherwise, they're completely free.

It's hard to recommend this game to all Cobra Kai fans, because it succeeds for completely different reasons than the show does. It's kind of glitchy, the art is garish and certain actions cause severe framerate drops – but despite its flaws, I had a genuinely good time with it. Much like The Karate Kid on NES, Cobra Kai on the Switch doesn't live up to its source material, but there's still fun to be had if you're open to it. **– KRIS**

6.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAME MILL
DEVELOPER: FLUX RATING: T

7.0

A More Successful Second Attempt

NICKELODEON KART RACERS 2: GRAND PRIX

WHEN I REVIEWED the original Nickelodeon Kart Racers, I came away largely unimpressed, feeling that the game didn't really tap into the well of potential that such a broad license offers. As a result, I wasn't really looking forward to playing its sequel, Nickelodeon Kart Racers 2: Grand Prix.

That said, I came away pleasantly surprised. Make no mistake: Mario, Sonic and Crash don't have to worry about losing their parking spots with anyone but the most diehard Nick fans. But as these things go? They did all right.

One of my biggest grievances with the first game was that it didn't tap into enough of The First Network for Kids' 40+ year history. It offered only a small selection of racers, most of whom were long past their peak relevance (and I suppose the SpongeBob crew could be in that boat). This time, there are 30 playable characters, ranging from classics such as Ren & Stimpy and Rocko to more contemporary fare like The Loud House and The JoJo & BowBow Show Show.

Incidentally, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles featured here are still the 2012 versions – it would be nice to see the highly underrated Rise of the TMNT incarnation get its due at some point (and maybe use some form of actual vehicles from the show).

And sadly, while stunt and winning animations lend some personality to these characters, they all remain unvoiced. Why would they do this? Was it just too far over budget? I don't know. **gets slimed**

But that's getting off into the negative, when there are still plenty of improvements elsewhere. There are more courses with more varied themes (28 in total), including one dedicated to Double Dare, which doesn't even have a representative racer. No Legends of the Hidden Temple track, though, which is a missed opportunity. (San Lorenzo Cruise from Hey Arnold!: The Jungle Movie has a similar vibe, though.)

Items feel a bit more Nick-themed as well. Rather, a *lot* more Nick-themed, from barrelling other racers over with exploding Logs (they're big, they're heavy, they're wood) to protecting yourself with the glorious concoction that is the Krabby Patty, item-stealing M.O.U.S.E.R.S. and my personal favorite, Powdered Toast Man, who invincibly propels you through a large chunk of the course (so long as you keep from crashing) as you cling tenaciously to your, er, steering wheel.

Then we have the pit crew. Slime makes a return, but rather than filling a boost gauge, this time it fills a gauge that allows you to employ the special abilities bestowed upon you by select members of your pit crew, which is comprised of three choices from another 70 Nickelodeon characters. That adds a certain strategic element to racing, such as picking a chief with a slime-fueled ability and another member who helps you regain slime faster, thus allowing you to use the ability with greater frequency.

There are new modes here, including Slime Grand Prix, Free Race, Time Trials, Mario Kart DS-like Challenges and a Battle Mode-style Arena (Control the Golden Spatula and Free-for-All). In the case of Arena, it was tough to meet the win conditions, even on Easy, but that was more due to the 180-second time limit than anything else.

There's also new online multiplayer with friends or random folks. Though unfortunately for me, my hours are less Nick and more Nick at Nite, which might explain why I had difficulty finding a match here.

If you're a Nick fan (or just out shopping for one), and you're trying to decide between this game and the original, then there's simply no question – take this one, and just pretend you never saw the first one.

Now I just need to wait and see if they make an even more improved third entry in the series, and if they do, whether or not Nick's recent acquisition of Garfield would make the cut. Garfield has separately starred in his own kart series, after all, so it would be like fusing the two! **– DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAMEMILL
DEVELOPER: BAMTANG GAMES
RATING: E

8.5

War and Peace

SAKUNA: OF RICE AND RUIN

PEANUT BUTTER & CHOCOLATE are clearly seen in this game about rice.

In our last issue, we shined the NF spotlight on "peanut butter & chocolate" games – or games that take two separate styles of gameplay and join them together to create a combination that's greater than either one could be alone. Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin is the perfect example of this practice, as it's a fusion of an action platformer and a farming sim. It's fast and frantic and full of tension for about half of the time you spend playing it – and the other half of the time is zen, peaceful and just dramatically emotionally different.

It works beautifully. I suspected it would when the game was first revealed, but it's comforting to have confirmation now from my own play experience with the final release.

But not everything is as I expected!

Sakuna is snooty. She's a stuck-up spoiled brat rich kid who's only ever known life as a god in the Lofty Realm, haughtily laughing at the pitiful humans who inhabit the Lowly Realm below. This isn't the first video game to ever have an intentionally unlikable protagonist, but I like the choice here, because it supports the gameplay well.

In the farming part in particular. This pompous, pretentious princess has never had to work a day in her life, and her being forced to get her hands dirty – and learn patience – to raise a rice crop kills two birds with one stone. It gives her a character arc and lets you see her growth over time, and it also gives you as the player the proper perspective to be able to deal with the unglamorousness of the sim side of this experience.

Cultivating rice takes time. You have to take it one step at a time, slowly paying attention to each part of the process, from removing weeds to managing the water level of the paddy to mixing up batches of fertilizer. I admittedly haven't played a ton of farm sims over the years, but this one struck me as more involved than a game in the Harvest Moon/Story of Seasons series. It's also doesn't hold your hand – you don't get a step-by-step tutorial teaching you how to do everything perfectly. There's trial and error involved, and your first rice crops certainly won't be your best.

Don't get turned off, though! Again, the slow-paced "Of Rice" gameplay is totally counterbalanced by the instant gratification of the "and Ruin" action sequences.

Sakuna swings into action like Spider-Man with her magical scarf that shoots off her shoulders to attach to platforms and ceilings to pull her along, as well as grabbing hold of enemies and yanking them or letting Sakuna quickly spin around behind them. It's an immensely satisfying gameplay mechanic that really does feel like it could become the basis of a great 2D Spider-Man game (if Disney/Marvel ever offered the license to Edelweiss).

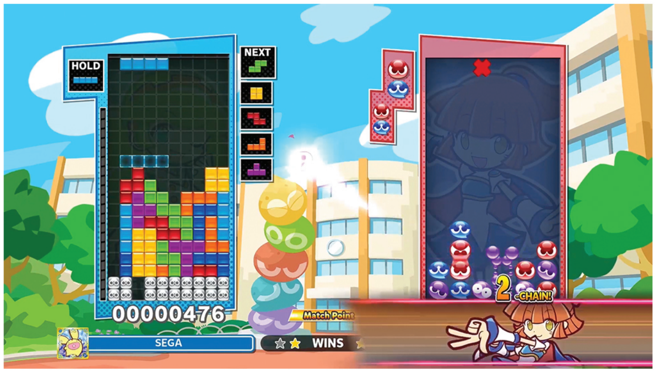
But the scarf is just the start. Our high-and-mighty heroine also has to set her godliness aside in order to wield her weapons, which are all dirt-encrusted farming tools like scythes and hoes. Though not meant for combat, they do the job perfectly well, as Sakuna has a suite of skills to use in conjunction with them – light and heavy attacks are supported by special attacks that drain a usage meter, so you can't just spam your most powerful swipes and spins. Another aspect I didn't expect but was pleasantly surprised by is the fact that you can customize Sakuna's moveset as you unlock more and more battle techniques. The result is a combat system that never feels stale, and also empowers the player to experiment. It's great!

Bouncing back and forth between farming and fighting, you ultimately extend your foothold bit by bit on the island of demons that serves as the setting. It's a fun gameplay loop made even deeper by character interactions with the "lowly" humans living alongside Sakuna, all of whom end up having their own roles to play too.

Playing Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin has been a delightful experience. It's so nice to get hyped for an upcoming game, look forward to it for over a year, finally play it and find that it lives up to your hopes! I fully recommend that you too experience this particular blend of peanut butter & chocolate for yourself. **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MARVELOUS (XSEED)
DEVELOPER: EDELWEISS
RATING: T

P.S. I ended up buying the standard physical version. I promised I'd report back about that! The Divine Edition was tempting, but I just don't have the space to store all the extra stuff that comes with video game special editions any more!



Attack the Stack

PUYO PUYO TETRIS 2

SWITCH

PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SEGA
RATING: E10+

PUYO PUYO TETRIS was a great launch title for the Nintendo Switch – take two puzzle franchises, give players all the options they need for single, local or online multiplayer and add a silly story filled with the trademark zaniness of the Puyo Puyo universe. Nearly four years later, Puyo Puyo Tetris 2 is here to join the other puzzle game juggernauts playable on the Switch, with the same fast-paced action, some new faces and a lot of new and refined play options.

The option to jump into a Player vs. CPU Puyo Puyo, Tetris or Fusion battle is once again available right from the starting menu, but novice players will especially want to check out the Lessons mode: It's extremely thorough, with 100 lessons for each game! It also has individual guided exercises you can play that illustrate concepts like stair stacks, T-spins, sandwiches and other techniques used to set up huge Puyo chains and high-scoring Tetris line clears. They're designed for the player starting from zero in mind – letting you practice a few times with useful guides before taking the training wheels off – and you can play them in any order. The lessons on T-spins were especially helpful for me – it's a technique that I admit I'm completely unfamiliar with, and after getting demolished by a few adept T-spinners during online games, I decided it was time to hit the blocks – er, *books* and get some practice in.

First-timers who play through Story Mode won't be missing much if they missed out on the original, but those of you who played the original will be feeling a little bit of déjà vu. One change over the original is that you have the option to skip a level after your first loss, and there is an option to turn off the auto-scaling of difficulty as you progress – and believe me, if you're not quick on the draw, you're going to *need* it. The world map is bright and colorful, but I found it visually busy and confusing to move around in, until I discovered the Shortcut menu and was able to jump to whatever level I wished. (I just wish the level icons were a little bigger.)

While there are still a few times you'll be playing Swap or Fusion battles, you'll also be playing plenty of Team Battles, an RPG-style mechanic that was introduced in the Japan-only 3DS title Puyo Puyo Chronicles. Your Team consists of three allies who are added to your roster as you progress through Story Mode, along with equippable Item Cards that grant bonuses and score multipliers. You've also got the opportunity to win additional Item Cards if you complete a specific goal in a Team Battle level – such as performing a big enough Puyo chain or a certain number of Tetrises within a time limit – but there should've been more methods of obtaining them other than grinding.

Each of your teammates has a skill that draws from your MP pool that lets you do things like change Puyo colors, auto-clear lines, restore your HP or activate other helpful buffs and debuffs. There are a variety of preset Teams complete with Item Card sets at your disposal, and you can play with either Puyo Puyo or Tetris teams, which is great if you feel more comfortable playing with one version over the other. (Most Item Cards and special abilities are only designed for one game type, however.)

The online mode gives you a ton of options to play with, with the ability to filter out potential opponents by connection strength. I tried a few battles in different modes of play and found the performance to be fairly consistent, but expect a brief lag when clearing Puyos or lines if you're going against opponents with less than full signal strength. Like the original, local and online games accept up to four players and can be played with a single Joy-Con.

With all the improvements, refinements and new additions Sega has contributed – and with a bunch of free DLC scheduled to be on the way in the year ahead – I'm glad to say that Puyo Puyo Tetris 2 is an improvement over the original in every way. This is a can't-miss addition to any puzzle fan's library! **– REBECCA**

8.5

The 100-Years-Ago War

HYRULE WARRIORS: AGE OF CALAMITY

I'VE SAID IT before, but I'll be upfront again: I wasn't totally enamored by Breath of the Wild. I enjoyed it to an extent, but its open-world nature only stoked my anxiety – I prefer a focused experience that doesn't exhaust me with an overabundance of options. I did appreciate the improved world-building compared to past Zelda titles – I just wished the world's story had been explored in greater detail.

That's why Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity excited me upon its reveal. A prequel in which you command Breath of the Wild's underutilized extended cast through a combat-heavy campaign in the trademark Warriors hack-and-slash style? Sign me up! But as is always the case when a new Warriors crossover arrives, there are bound to be many newcomers who've heard in passing that these games are mindless button-mashers. Allow me to allay those rumors.

As my former Destructoid colleague Jim Sterling once described, Warriors games could be considered the modern equivalent of yesteryear's beat-'em-ups – select from an ensemble of unique brawlers and perform deliciously flashy combos on fiendish hordes. What sets this series apart is its incorporation of light strategy in the form of outposts that must be captured to cut off enemy supply lines. These outposts are guarded by captains that require a more measured approach than the usual trash mobs. Said mobs aren't without purpose, as mowing them down builds experience and a special attack meter to better prepare you for those more formidable opponents.

These terrifying beasts – Moblins, Guardians, Hinoxes, Lynels and of course boss encounters – can be a sudden shock for anyone led to believe those aforementioned Warriors stereotypes. You could chip away at their thick hides, or you can wait for an opening and target their weak point gauge, which, once depleted, will allow you to perform a devastating follow-up. Incorporated from Breath of the Wild is the Flurry Rush, triggered by dodging an enemy attack at the last possible second – this basic addition grants much finer control over the pace of battle compared to the previous Hyrule Warriors games.

Also unlike its predecessors, Age of Calamity is less about strict crowd control and more about meeting key objectives in a relaxed fashion. Missions take place on the same map as Breath of the Wild – albeit with certain structures not yet having fallen into complete disrepair – and true to that game's spirit, you're invited to explore in search of treasure chests and materials. Maybe even chop down a tree or two! (However, there is that slight moment of disconnect when you try to scale a wall or hop a fence, only to remember that in this appearance, these are enclosed arenas. Even I couldn't shake that free-roaming mindset!)

This gameplay loop perfectly serves the game's setting: the great war a century prior to the events of Breath of the Wild. I'd even go so far as to say that Age of Calamity does a superior job in exploiting the characters and lore that Breath of the Wild established. Before, we were merely told that the Champions were mighty warriors of legend. Here, you see their might! You write their legend!

And what power they wield! Controls are as simple as alternating between Y and X to unleash havoc, but this ease belies the awesome variety of techniques in each playable character's repertoire. Link can equip one-handed swords, two-handed swords or spears, each offering disparate play-styles. Urbosa can store up electricity

8.5

in her scimitar to unleash a volley of lightning strikes. And my personal fave, Impa, can summon clones of herself to drastically increase the number of strikes from even the most basic attacks.

Add to that the ability for anyone to use Runes – Remote Bomb, Magnesis, Cryonis and Stasis – in a unique fashion. Using Remote Bomb, for example, Revali will launch a string of bomb arrows, while Zelda can create a drone walker that spits out smaller bombs before exploding itself. And is there any greater sight than Impa atop a Cryonis ice block, steering it around like a frictionless go-kart? There are so many ways to crush your enemies that simply running around for minutes at a time cleaning up swathes of Lizalfos and Bokoblins just to watch the KO counter climb never becomes a chore.

And these are just the characters that have been showcased in promotional materials! Age of Calamity doesn't skimp on the roster additions; while they're sourced from a single game as opposed to the earlier Hyrule Warriors' dimension-spanning cavalcade, their inclusions are no less surprising. Without spoiling who they are, I will hint that one of the reps is actually a foursome, and the way they tower over the battlefield is rather comical.

Another hint toward the final lineup is the nature of the narrative, which isn't quite the straightforward prequel story we assumed. The opening cutscene involves a friendly miniature Guardian from the moment of Calamity Ganon's attack on Hyrule Castle that travels back in time to warn Zelda of the impending disaster. And you know as well as I do to expect the unexpected whenever time travel is involved! Even though the story detour veers slightly into fanfic territory, the interactions that unfold as a result can be cathartic for anyone who lamented certain characters' lonely burdens during the original course of events.

Ironically, the only one to not benefit from the expanded story treatment is Link himself. He was already a stone-faced statue throughout most of Breath of the Wild, but in Age of Calamity, where characters essentially take turns occupying the leading role, Link's robotic stoicism is more pronounced than ever. He doesn't laugh. He doesn't smile. He doesn't even hold a conversation in the distant background, out of earshot for the sake of maintaining his silent protagonist street cred. His sole purpose is to wield the Master Sword, which is even less critical to the heroes' plans considering that this a Warriors game and that any one fighter is capable of dominating any one enemy, plot devices be darned!

On the upside, Age of Calamity resolves Breath of the Wild's most frustrating mechanic: breakable weapons are no more! Swing that farming hoe right up until the credits roll if you so desire! What happens to all the other weapons you collect, though? Give them to the blacksmith, who will fuse them to produce more powerful versions. The "Blade of Evil's Bane" can be whatever you want it to be!

Do I consider Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity to be better than Breath of the Wild? Yeah, I suppose I do! Even if that thought sounds sacrilegious, you can't deny that this battle-hardened prequel is able to scratch an itch that its source material couldn't. It's fun, reduces stress and knows when to cut players a little slack. Don't miss it, even if Breath of the Wild didn't hook you! **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO & OMEGA FORCE RATING: T

SECOND OPINION
MARIO & LUIGI: BOWSER'S INSIDE STORY + BOWSER JR.'S JOURNEY

I LEFT THIS prominent "Plus" game out of the Addition Addiction feature earlier in this issue, because I feel it deserves more individual attention. Why? Because it both illustrates the add-on idea we discussed there *plus* it's arguably the most important Bowser game ever made!

King Bowser Koopa has had quite a bit of character development over the course of the past 35 years, but it's come in bits and pieces: the minutes of screen time he got in the cartoons, the lines of dialogue he was alloted in various video games' cutscenes and the true menace he brought to bear in the few minutes spent bashing him in boss battles. Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story changed that by giving him a larger starring role than ever before. The plumber brothers are still here and still get top billing, but inside this truly is Bowser's story.

He gets tons of time in the spotlight. He gets more dialogue than he ever has before – probably more than all his prior games combined. And he's fully controllable! Outside of the Super Smash Bros. series, that has been a truly rare thing. But here, you get to command the full might of the Koopa King and feel his heft and power as he stomps around the Mushroom Kingdom. It's a blast to be able to blast baddies with Bowser's fire breath, then leap into a turn-based battle and pummel them to a pulp with his colossal fists. His oft-overlooked turtle shell even sees action as the defense mechanism it's meant to be!

So no other game gets the feeling of being Bowser quite as right as this one, and that's a big plus. Some other elements subtracted from my enjoyment of this adventure, though.

This 3DS quest is a full remake of a 2009 DS RPG of the same name, and we know now that it was thrown together quickly and out of desperation by a team of developers who were trying to save their studio from bankruptcy. They failed to do so, and now AlphaDream is no more. This – now their final release – was too little too late, and while the majority of players wouldn't be aware of any of that real-world drama, it did color my perspective while I played. I felt the 3DS remake of Superstar Saga, from the GBA era, was unnecessary – its original version was, and still is, perfectly playable. (And much less expensive to own, via the Wii U eShop!) But Bowser's Inside Story feels like it needed to be revisited even less than its predecessor. You could even run its original DS cart on your same 3DS system if you wanted to!

Again, that's just me admitting my bias. But setting aside external events, parts of the game itself left me disappointed – like the drudgery of the battles. How is it that the dev team never fixed this flaw after 16 years spent making this series? Boss battles drag on and on, forcing you to repeat the same attacks and same dodges ad nauseam until you might decide to set the game aside out of boredom. Even some common enemy encounters from the overworld can last up to 10 minutes, since you'll sometimes have to fight foes on two fronts: as Bowser on the top screen, and also as the Bros in his belly. (That setting is another positive point, though. Having an adventure take place inside Bowser's body was an inspired idea.)

Lastly, the "+" part: Bowser Jr.'s Journey. As Neal said in his review two years ago, it's mostly a hands-off and kind of boring side mode that doesn't end up adding much to the overall package after all. What's worst, to me, is that it leans fully into the retcon that claims the Koopalings aren't Bowser's kids any more. That's still so weird. They're like lieutenants now, forced to babysit the bratty Jr. since he'll one day claim the Koopa crown himself? I hope not. No one can replace the true King! **– LUCAS**

9.0 NEAL

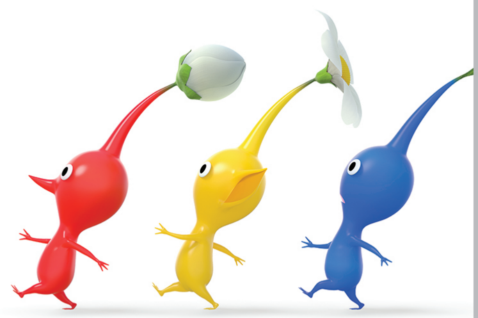
8.0 LUCAS

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the past two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
AI: The Somnium Files	8.5	Tony	#44
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	9.0	Rebecca	#46
Ary and the Secret of Seasons	6.0	Lucas	#49
Astral Chain	8.5	Jonathan	#42
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night	7.5	Tony	#48
BurgerTime Party!	8.0	Lucas	#44
Catherine: Full Body	8.5	Jonathan	#49
Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics	8.5	Lucas	#48
Contra: Rogue Corps	7.0	David	#43
Crash Team Racing: Nitro-Fueled	8.0	David	#41
Crystal Crisis	9.0	Jonathan	#40
Daemon X Machina	7.0	Chris	#42
Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise	7.0	Jonathan	#49
Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth – Complete Edition	8.5	Josh	#44
Dragon Quest Builders 2	9.0	Shesez	#41
Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age – Definitive Edition	9.5	Lucas	#43
Dreamworks Dragons: Dawn of New Riders	7.5	David	#39
Fire Emblem: Three Houses	9.5	Lucas	#41
Fitness Boxing	5.5	Chris	#38
Friday the 13th: The Game – Ultimate Slasher Edition	8.0	Kevin C.	#46
Ghostbusters: The Video Game Remastered	7.5	Brett	#43
Guacamelee! One-Two Punch Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#42
Heroland	7.0	Rebecca	#45
Ice Age: Scrat's Nutty Adventure!	5.0	Chris	#45
Indivisible	7.0	Tony	#47
Katamari Damacy REROLL	9.5	Tony	#38
Langrisser I & II	8.5	David	#46
Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy – Deluxe Edition	8.5	Brett	#45
LEGO DC Super-Villains	8.0	Thor	#38
Luigi's Mansion 3	9.0	Chris	#44
Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games: Tokyo 2020	8.5	David	#44
Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit	9.5	Lucas	#49
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order	7.0	Brett	#41
Mega Man Zero/ZX Legacy Collection	9.0	David	#45
Model Debut #nicola	7.0	Rebecca	#44
Monster Boy and the Cursed Kingdom	8.5	David	#38
Moonlighter	8.0	Lucas	#39
Moving Out	8.0	Lucas	#47
My Time at Portia	5.5	Chris	#40
Namco Museum Arcade Pac	7.0	Brett	#38
New Super Lucky's Tale	9.0	David	#44
New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe	8.0	Lucas	#38
Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	9.0	Brett	#43
Nintendo Labo VR Kit	9.0	Lucas	#40
Paper Mario: The Origami King	8.5	Brett	#48
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX	8.0	Lucas	#46
Pokémon Shield	9.0	Thor	#44
Pokémon Sword	8.0	Lucas	#44
Ring Fit Adventure	8.5	Matthew T.	#44
Rune Factory 4 Special	7.5	Rebecca	#46
Sega Genesis Classics	8.5	Brett	#38
SNK 40th Anniversary Collection	8.5	Thor	#38
Snack World: The Dungeon Crawl – Gold	6.0	Brett	#45
Spyro Reignited Trilogy	9.0	David	#42
Star Wars Pinball	9.0	Lucas	#42
Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town	7.5	Rebecca	#48
Super Dragon Ball Heroes: World Mission	6.0	Tony	#40
Super Mario 3D All-Stars	7.0	Lucas	#49
Super Mario Maker 2	10	Tony	#41
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	7.5	David	#44
Team Sonic Racing	8.5	David	#41
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III	9.0	Maggie	#49
The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening	9.5	Jonathan	#43
The Ninja Saviors: Return of the Warriors	7.0	Jonathan	#44
The Nintendo Switch Lite	9.0	Matthew L.	#43
The Outer Worlds	8.0	Matthew L.	#47
The Sega Genesis Mini	9.0	David	#43
The Wonderful 101: Remastered	9.0	Jonathan	#47
Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE Encore	7.5	Matthew L.	#46
Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes	8.0	Jonathan	#38
Trials of Mana	8.5	Brett	#47
Trine 4: The Nightmare Prince	9.0	Lucas	#44
Wolfenstein: Youngblood	7.0	Chris	#41
Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition	10	Lucas	#48
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	9.0	Tony	#43
Yoshi's Crafted World	7.5	Lucas	#39



3DS

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Etrian Odyssey Nexus	8.5	Nadia	#39
Kirby's Extra Epic Yarn	7.5	Neal	#39
Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story + Bowser Jr.'s Journey	9.0	Neal	#38
Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth	8.0	Matthew L.	#40
Yo-kai Watch 3	8.5	Lucas	#39

SECOND OPINION
HEY! PIKMIN

IN THE IN-BETWEEN time after I wrapped up my memory-refreshing Wii U Pikmin 3 run but before I got Pikmin 3 Deluxe delivered, I decided to complete the franchise experience by finally finishing the black sheep of the series: Hey! Pikmin on the 3DS. I'd toyed around with it a bit when it first launched in 2017, but since Kevin was on the review and not me, I never bothered seeing it through to the end. Until now!

Hey! Pikmin is fully outclassed now that the main series has gone portable via the Switch, but I do like the sidescrolling solution the developers at Arzest came up with in this handheld debut. This is a low-impact experience, as you slowly guide Olimar from left to right and chuck Pikmin with touchscreen taps to command them to attack enemies or pick up items. For the most part, it's an easygoing affair that's well-suited to playing casually for a few minutes here and there, as the levels aren't too long.

Trying to play it perfectly will put you into a panic, though. You have to be critically precise with some screen taps in order to safely fling your tiny plant soldiers, because enemy hitboxes are unforgiving – and if you lose even one Pikmin over the course of a whole level, you'll miss the chance to claim top honors there and you'll have to replay it from the beginning. It's just like other Pikmin games in the end, I guess – you just have to make your peace with sadly losing some of these little guys! **– LUCAS**

8.0 KEVIN C.

8.0 LUCAS

WOODWORKING

Popular Art in Poplar Form

One inventive Etsy artist is remaking iconic Nintendo images as intricate wood carvings!

EACH OF OUR physical issues is printed on paper – but what if we offered an option with a little more heft? Etsy artist Pigminted recently decided to rewind time a bit and imagine a magazine made with paper's origin point: wood! See above the results of that endeavor: the original issue of Nintendo Power, but remade as a beautiful wood carving keepsake!

Woodworking of this nature is rare to find in this digital day and age, and seen even less often is a crossover of the classic art form of wood carving and popular images drawn from the video game industry. It's an unexpected clash that seems to be bringing in quite a bit of cash!

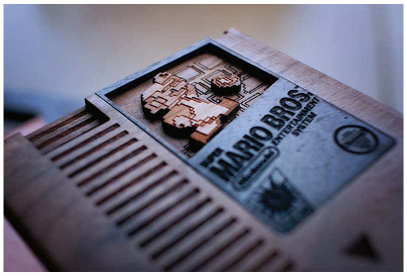
Yes, Pigminted's sales are soaring as a result of recently going viral across the social media of many Nintendo fans. And not just because of that NP piece above! (Which is priced at $200, by the way.) No, the artist is also offering a wide range of other iconic scenes, recreations and custom collages, all painstakingly crafted from blocks of pine, walnut, cherry, poplar and other types of wood.

Many of the available items are remakes of box or cartridge art – see the examples below: the original Super Mario Bros. cart given added depth, a Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door tableau (on the back of that game's box) and the Star Fox team making their SF64 cart look a whole lot better.

Pigminted also offers several customizable items, including a variety of RPG character screens. Have some fond memories of your final team from Final Fantasy VI? Get them immortalized in wood and hang them on your wall!

. . . I realize this has all sounded kind of like an ad. Oh well! Maybe I can just go with it and ask if I can score a discount on that NP #1. Or maybe I could ask for an NF version to be made! **– LUCAS**

Etsy.com/shop/Pigminted



CUSTOM CONSTRUCTION

Let's Go Play in Link's House!

The most iconic home in Hateno Village has been pulled out of Hyrule and brought into the real world.

MY DAD IS an engineer. He's spent his career designing machinery that boggles my mind with its complexity, while at home he's crafted projects like a custom-built bunk bed that my sons still use.

My brother is an engineer. He's spent *his* career designing machinery that boggles my mind with its complexity, while at home he's crafted projects like a beautiful custom-built bookshelf wall for his wife.

I was already intimidated enough just by my immediate family. I didn't need to see this!

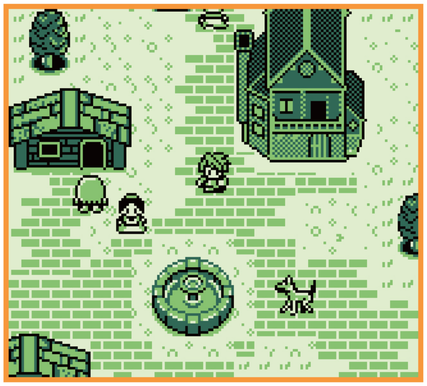
DIY expert and Father of the Year candidate Donovan Ewing, who creates custom construction project content for the YouTube channel Once Upon a Workbench, has assembled the ultimate backyard playhouse for his kids: Link's House from Breath of the Wild!

Yes, the very home that Link can own, furnish and use as a refuge on the outskirts of Hateno Village has been meticulously remade (in smaller, playhouse scale) by Donovan and his family full of helpers. The project took months to complete – mainly because the detail put into each piece of craftsmanship was incredible! The stonework, roof tiles, door, window and paint job would all make Bolson himself beam with pride.

And that's just the exterior! Inside the structure, the layout also mirrors Link's in-game home, from the staircase up to his sleeping loft to the array of weapon and shield displays hanging decoratively on his walls. They even custom-crafted items like the framed photo of Link, Zelda and the Champions from the Champions' Ballad DLC for extra decor!

The full video documenting the journey is well worth a watch. And if you, like my own Dad and brother, have the skills to make this happen in your own backyard, Donovan's got the full set of plans for sale too! **— LUCAS**

YouTube.com/OnceUponAWorkbench



GB STUDIO GAME REVIEW

DRAGONBORNE

Seek out the legendary dragon slayer . . . your father!

PHYSICAL GAME BOY games are back!

Dragonborne, by indie developer Spacebot Interactive, is a brand-new Game Boy role-playing game that is releasing on cartridge in 2021. For Game Boy enthusiasts and collectors, the idea of dusting off an old handheld to play something fresh and original is a tantalizing prospect.

Made using GB Studio (a freeware Game Boy development engine), Dragonborne is a love letter to old-school Game Boy RPGs such as Dragon Quest III and The Final Fantasy Legend. When your father, the legendary dragon slayer, goes missing right as a shadowy cult starts terrorizing your hometown, you head out on an adventure to save the world and rescue your dear old Dad.

While most games built in GB Studio tend to be short and sweet, Dragonborne meanders its way through hours of gameplay, giving the player a large, expansive fantasy world to explore. GB Studio was designed for simple adventure games, but here the engine has been pushed to its utter limits, as Dragonborne features a full turn-based combat system, complete with leveling. Most GB Studio games can be finished in under an hour, but Dragonborne will keep the player busy for quite a long time.

The resulting game is impressive, even if it doesn't entirely live up to the legacy it builds upon. In spite of its premium price tag and physical release, Dragonborne sadly still feels like an amateur project.

While Game Boy games are, by design, never the most visually impressive titles, it's clear that Dragonborne lacks polish. Much of the artwork doesn't quite mesh together – many of the sprites look like they come from different games with disparate art styles. The game is also littered with spelling and punctuation errors that would really have benefited from a closer proofread.

The bigger problem, though, is the gameplay itself. Yes, Dragonborne boasts a large RPG world to explore, but there isn't quite enough content to actually fill it comfortably. This feels like a good game that has been stretched out for the sake of adding to its playtime. (There's a reason why most GB Studio games are short and to the point.)

Dragonborne's homage to classic Game Boy games also falls into a common nostalgiabait trap: In recreating the classic JRPG experience, the game suffers from many of the genre's more egregious flaws. Here's hoping you like grinding for gold, because progress in Dragonborne is severely hampered by the protagonist's lack of cash! Again, this adds to the game's run time, but at the expense of pacing. Battles can often feel like a chore once you realize just how much effort it's going to take to heal yourself afterwards.

It feels cruel to be too harsh on a game that was clearly made out of genuine love for the ghosts of gaming past, but at the same time, prospective players need to bear in mind that the game does have significant limitations and may not appeal to all Game Boy fans equally. Those who absolutely adore Game Boy RPGs will no doubt get a kick out of Dragonborne, and any collectors will cherish adding a new item to their trophy case. Alternatively, if your personal Game Boy RPG experience never progressed beyond Pokémon Red & Blue, you might find this quest to be a bit too taxing.

All that said, the effort invested to both make a new Game Boy RPG of this scale and pursue production of physical cartridges is praiseworthy – perhaps the developers at Spacebot will build on the momentum from this release and create a follow-up quest that addresses the shortcomings of this first effort. We'll keep an eye out for any potential Dragonborne 2. **– MATTHEW L.**

FIND SOME FRESH AA BATTERIES

PHYSICAL COPIES AVAILABLE

"New" Game Boy cartridges are not as rare as you might think. Access to cheaper manufacturing technology, including 3D printing, has made it easier than ever for fans to make their own physical games. Sometimes this technology gets used for the creation of pirate reproduction (or "repro") cartridges, with fans making new copies of rare and expensive titles, like the original Shantae. These make collecting Game Boy games more difficult, as unscrupulous sellers attempt to sell these fakes on eBay. Other enthusiasts, though, use these new cartridges for homebrew games. There are some fascinating indie Game Boy carts on the market, and with software like GB Studio making it easier than ever to create an original Game Boy game, we're likely to see more in the future.

7.0

Spacebot-Interactive.com

BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NEXT ISSUE

For the last few years, we've been particularly looking forward to publishing NF Issue #51 – because it offers the perfect opportunity to highlight the work of one of gaming's most creative minds: Suda51! It's also perfect timing, too, since his iconic protagonist Travis Touchdown is just getting ready to strike again in **No More Heroes III**. We're planning a mega-sized super interview with Suda51 in which we'll ask him 51 different questions! Get ready for some weird insights into the inner workings of his brain!

Additionally, our King Koopa coverage will continue with our full review of **Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury**, where we'll finally be able to pull back the curtain on all of the secrets it has in store and see how accurate our predictions ended up being. Plus, a few more surprises just might be in store from the Big N shortly after this issue reaches your mailbox . . . but we're not allowed to say quite yet! (Next time!)

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #51:

NO MORE HEROES III

51 QUESTIONS FOR SUDA51

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD + BOWSER'S FURY

NEW POKÉMON SNAP

SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD: THE GAME

YS IX: MONSTRUM NOX

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

MONSTER HUNTER STORIES 2: WINGS OF RUIN

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2

METROID PRIME 4

ATELIER RYZA 2: LOST LEGENDS & THE SECRET FAIRY

BALAN WONDERWORLD

GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS RESURRECTION

AND MUCH **MORE!**

MARCH/APRIL 2021

COUNT THE KOOPAS ... PLUS PLUS SIGNS!

YOU'VE REACHED THE end of another NF issue . . . but you're not done yet! We've got another counting challenge printed throughout all the previous pages, all ready for your re-perusal.

Or maybe two challenges! First up, your task is to Count the Koopas. (By which I mean Bowsers.) How many images of King Bowser Koopa can you find throughout this entire issue? There's one just below, so you're off on the right foot right away.

Plus, there's a secondary goal! This one is trickier and more time-consuming, but see if you can add up all of the plus signs placed throughout this edition as well. They might be depicted via artwork (like the one held in Bowser's claw grip below), or simply typed out in text throughout all the various articles, like so: +. (To help you out, you don't have to count the plus signs used as a repeating pattern in the background of the Long Live King Koopa feature, or the similar pattern that appears on the front and back covers of the issue. We're trying to add fun, not stress!)

When you're all done, add both totals together. Then we'll print the added-up answer in our next issue, so you can check to see if you got it right! Good luck! **— LUCAS**

NF50

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